This paper reviews the literature on significant influencers in the lives of adolescents. It considers the role of parents and nonparental significant others. Particular attention is given to the role of these important people in the lives of early adolescents.

**Significant Influencers**

In the contemporary western world, young people live in a complex social milieu that includes for most, nuclear family, school, structured social groups (e.g., musical or sporting), and various formal and informal peer groupings. In this setting, they perceive as significant, the support of parents, friends and extended family members (Claes, Lacourse, Bouchard, & Luckow, 2001; Laursen, 1998; Sartor & Younis, 2002; Updegraff, Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Sales, & Loenard, 2002). Beyond peers and the immediate and extended family, young people indicate the importance of other adults, primarily for mentoring, guidance and support (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Both boys and girls equally state the importance of adult, significant others in their lives (Claes et al., 2001; Scales & Gibbons, 1996). Research in this field has only, in the last decade, begun to identify the possible effects of these supportive relationships on the social and emotional development of adolescents (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004).

**Parents**

Parents who guide and direct, set limits and appropriately discipline their teenage children play a positive part in the development of their adolescents. Barber (1997) proposes a model of parenting with a strong theoretical foundation linking parenting and adolescent identity formation. Barber identified three aspects of socialisation that are necessary for healthy development: a sense of connectedness, also referred to as warmth, with significant others; parental regulation of behaviour; and facilitation of psychological autonomy through responsiveness to the need to separate from parents. The sense of security found in the connectedness and warmth in regard to significant others “is crucial for exploration in identity formation” (Sartor & Youniss, 2002, p. 221).
It may be hypothesised that parental support and monitoring would be associated with higher identity achievement in adolescents. Sartor and Youn尼斯 (2002) found that parental support and monitoring of social and school activities were significant predictors of identity achievement. They describe how parental encouragement and support are vital in the individuation process as “adolescents are not leaving behind their parents as they develop their identity…but rather, a qualitative change that permits distancing occurs” (Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002, p. 222).

The parental role in the individuation of their adolescent children and in their adolescents’ ongoing identity formation is usually positive and vitally important. Berger and Thompson (1995) describe adolescence not as a time of detachment from parents, but as a time for parents to consciously nourish the individuation process by ongoing, persistent support and encouragement of their adolescent children. Sartor and Youn尼斯 (2002) found that adolescent identity formation “is an endeavour that leads to a restructuring of parent-adolescent relationships rather than a process of breaking ties with the family of origin” (p. 232).

This process of identity formation and individuation has been proposed as quite different for boys and girls. Gilligan (1986) suggests that boys and girls take different paths toward individuation and identity achievement. She states that for girls the process is one of building on skills already learnt that enhance interpersonal relationships and build a sense of connectedness. For boys, it is almost an opposite process and more complicated, with the identity crisis of adolescence being resolved through separating from others and establishing autonomy (Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002).

In a study by Sartor and Youn尼斯 (2002) girls reported higher levels of parental support and social and school monitoring. These researchers proposed that this indicated a higher degree of connectedness with parents. But the higher connectedness did not translate into higher identity scores even though all these factors are associated with higher identity achievement. The findings in this study suggested that gender differences exist when considering parental involvement and identity achievement.

In the early adolescent period parents still offer a significant influence as young people at this stage have not yet developed a strong need to seek and work toward independence from the family unit. The influence that parents have on their adolescent children has been found to be domain specific, pertaining specifically to school, future plans and career goals (Meeus, 1989; Youn尼斯 & Smollar, 1985). There is a contrast between the influence and support provided by mothers and fathers. Youn尼斯 and Smollar suggest that mothers are more likely to self-disclose information and feelings to their early adolescent child and there is a likelihood that
young people will respond to this modelling - therefore the development of a supportive relationship. It has been found that adolescents’ relationships with their mothers can be described as having a degree of symmetrical reciprocity (Younnis & Smollar). On the other hand fathers are seen as unilateral in their communication and less democratic in their decision making style (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992) or more judgemental and less willing to negotiate with their adolescent children (Noller & Callan, 1990).

**Nonparental significant others**

Early adolescence marks a time of important changes in how particular individuals and groups of people are influencing young people in their identity development (Allison & Schultz, 2001). During childhood the most significant “influencers” are the parents and friends of the child (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002). During the later years of childhood the level of influence of these two main groups starts to change (Cornwell, Eggebeen, & Meschke, 1996). The friends of the child, their peer group, take on a greater significance to the young person than they did during the middle childhood years (Azmitia, 2002). Contrary to popular belief, this increase of significance of the peer group is usually not to the detriment of the relationship with, or influence of, the parents of the emerging adolescent (Beam et al., 2002; Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002).

Parents are arguably the most important adults in the lives of most children (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002) but as adolescence begins and childhood starts to fade, the relationships between early adolescents and their parents change (Delaney, 1996). This change occurs along with young people developing increasingly important relationships with their peers (Beam et al., 2002).

**Extended adult networks**

Adults, other than parents, have been a part of the life of the child, but now the young adolescent sees relatives, friends of the family, teachers, coaches, music teachers or other significant adults from a variety of activities or fields of endeavour, in a different way (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996). Nonparental adults can play an influential role in adolescent development (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). In their research, Beam et al. (2002) refer to these people as “VIPS” – “very important nonparental adults” (p. 305), with the relationships between adolescents and VIPS being found to be a “normative component of adolescent development” (italics added, p. 323). The unique relationship provided by VIPS appears to be qualitatively different from that provided by peers or parents (Darling, Hamilton, & Hames, 2003; Darling, Hamilton, & Hames Shaver, 2003; Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002).
There are relatively few studies that have evaluated relationships between adolescents and their extended adult networks. Some studies have explored adolescents’ relationships with parents, extended family and other adults (Tatar, 1998), or members of the extended family and nonrelated adults (Claes et al., 2001). A study by Levine and Nidiffer (1996) investigating the underlying factors that enabled 24 people who grew up in poverty to make it to university found that only one factor seemed to be shared by all individuals: “an individual who touched or changed the students lives” (p. 65). A similar, but larger study, also found that personal intervention of informal mentors was the deciding factor in the success of adolescents living in poverty (Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Another study investigated the role of grandparents in the lives of African-American at risk adolescents (Burton, 1996) and work on resilience in young people has found that nonparental adults may have a positive effect on at-risk adolescents (Cowen & Work, 1988; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Quinton & Rutter, 1988).

**Grandparents**

Of particular note are the relationships between adolescents and their grandparents. These relationships and associated influences may occur through various processes and roles including regular care-provider, surrogate parent, buddy, storyteller or confidant (Bales, 2002; Tomlin, 1998). Just as older community members may have negative attitudes towards adolescents (Mackay, 1997; Thomas, 1998), as discussed earlier in this chapter, the reverse may apply with adolescents having preconceived negative perceptions of aged people including grandparents (Thomas, 1998). This issue has been recognised in some learning communities and intergenerational curricular for teaching aging appreciation to early adolescents has been trialled and investigated (Chowdhary, 2002). Despite possible negative perceptions in both directions, grandparents do play an important role in the lives of most adolescents (Kivett, 1991). A piece of retrospective research highlights grandparents as the most important nonparental significant adults recalled by college aged students from their adolescence (Galbo & Demetrulias, 1996).

Shared activities, particularly one-on-one interactions, have a strong influence in the quality of the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents (Kennedy, 1992). These relationships have taken on a new significance due to social changes experienced in western societies in the 20th century including the feminist movement, advances in medical and communication technologies, changes to traditional family structure, modern divorce laws, increases in drug and alcohol abuse and in child abuse and neglect (ACOSS, 2000; Backhouse & Lucas, 2004; Reynolds, Wright, &
Contemporary grandparents are a significant source of help to their families, being asked more often to take on the childcare role in place of working mothers (Edgar, 2000; Goodfellow, 2003). Most grandparents who find themselves taking on the parenting role find it a “mixed blessing” because the role is one that is still being clarified in society and is unique in each family situation (“Grandparents raising grandchildren”, 2003). The influence of grandparents may also be mitigated by factors including parental divorce and custody arrangements, geographical distance, intrafamilial relationships, socioeconomic status and rural/urban residence (Lin, Harwood, & Bonnesen, 2002; Tomlin, 1998).

Grandparent-grandchild relationships can be of the widest possible variety of types with some being significantly positive and others overtly negative (Fingerman, 1998). Quality grandchild-grandparent relationships have been described as having these five elements:

1. a reciprocal feeling of closeness;
2. grandchild feels known and understood by the grandparent;
3. grandchild knows and understands the grandparent;
4. grandparent exercises a positive influence on the grandchild;
5. grandchild views the relationship as authentic and independent (not dominated, but supported, by the middle generation) (Kennedy, 1992)

Gender differences are noted in the relationships between grandchildren and their grandparents (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Generally, females are more likely than males to name a grandparent as a significant adult (Galbo & Demetrulias, 1996). Kennedy (1992) found that grandchildren who named a grandmother as most close grandparent, “felt better understood by and felt they understood their grandparent better than did students whose most-close grandparent was a grandfather” (p. 86). The same study also found that two-thirds of the most-close grandparents were grandmothers, which may reflect both the longer lives of grandmothers and possibly the availability of grandmothers and their styles of relating to grandchildren. “While both male and female grandchildren more frequently identified grandmothers as most-close, grandsons more than granddaughters identified grandfathers as their most close grandparent” (Kennedy, 1992, p. 96).

“At-risk” adolescents

A significant proportion of research focuses on at-risk samples and the role of nonparental adults with these at-risk adolescents (refer to Beam et al., 2002; Rhodes, 1994; Ungar, 2004). The discussions and findings of such research focuses on the “compensatory role” (Beam et al., p.307) within the relationships. Beam et al.
suggest that in such studies the role of the mentor or VIP is typically conceptualised as someone who gives support or resources that are not adequately provided by parents. This may not be the basis of the relationships between adolescents and significant nonparental adults (Ungar, 2004). These relationships may develop quite naturally in the many and varied social contexts of the adolescent as part of normative development (Beam et al., 2002). Fewer than one in four young people in the study by Sartor and Youn尼斯 (2002) reported that a significant life event triggered the relationship with the nonparental adult. This further strengthens the belief that these relationships are normative rather than compensatory.

Several key studies on naturally occurring relationships between adolescents and nonparental adults (Garmezy, 1985; Quinton & Rutter, 1988; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) have found a link between the presence of an important nonparental adult and better outcomes for the child. Positive effects for adolescents include: a short or medium term influence that leads to a choice of a positive future pathway (Quinton & Rutter, 1988); increased resiliency amongst those at high risk as a result of poverty conditions and parental mental illness (Cowen & Work, 1988); lower levels of depressive symptomatology along with more positive career attitudes and greater life optimism amongst pregnant and parenting African American teens (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer, 1992); and lower involvement in problem behaviours in single parent families (Taylor, Casten, & Flickenger, 1993). It has also been found by Greenberger et al., (1998) that adolescents with a VIP – a very important nonparental adult – were significantly less likely to be involved in misconduct, regardless of the behaviour and attitudes of family members and close friends. This research by Greenberger et al. on young peoples’ relationships with nonparental adults and the resultant positive outcomes for adolescents adds foundation to the choice, in this research project, to study, in an Australian context, the nonparental significant adults identified by early adolescent boys.

**Early Adolescents and Significant Influencers**

Younger adolescents’ relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and other significant adults change as they enter and journey through early adolescence (Claes et al., 2001; Scales & Gibbons, 1996; Stepp, 2000). These changing relationships and the related changing influences of these “significant others” may cause disequilibria and raise identity related issues (Beam et al., 2002; Sartor & Youn尼斯, 2002). During the early adolescent period and continuing throughout adolescence, the teenager expands his or her perspective beyond the family and into the larger social system (Tatar, 1998). Recent research shows there may be a change in the
order of importance of influencers but the significance of the influencers certainly does change (Claes et al., 2001). “Parents, first, and peers, second, appear to be the contexts for primary influence for early adolescent identity development although all contexts contribute influential socialisation experiences” (Kroger, 2000, p. 51).

Significant nonfamilial adults play an important role in the lives of most early adolescents (Allison & Schultz, 2001; Beam et al., 2002). The situation young people find themselves in, or the particular problem they are facing, may influence who they refer to or from whom they seek assistance (Beam et al., 2002). Peers are more likely to influence the adolescent through modelling, and parents are more likely to influence by the development of norms (Biddle, Bank, & Marlin, 1982). The influence that significant nonparental adults have on early adolescents is an area still to be clarified by further empirical research (Beam et al., 2002).

In contemporary Western culture and specifically in Australian culture the influence of sports heroes and pop stars could be significant on the identity development of adolescents (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). An English study by Balswick and Ingoldsby (1982) asked adolescents to name heroes and heroines. They found approximately three times as many public (unknown) heroes were named over personal (known) heroes with opposite findings for personal heroines (3 to 4 times greater number) than for public heroines. A more recent study (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999), also conducted in England, found that sports stars featured highly amongst the heroes of 11-13 year old boys (53%) and 14-16 year old boys (24%). In the same study pop stars scored at 4% and 9% respectively. Hendry et al. (1992) asked Scottish young people to consider who they would pay most attention to or copy when considering a list of developmentally relevant issues or questions. Those to be considered by the young people included parents, friends, pop stars, sports stars and “experts” (eg doctors, teachers). They found that different people or groups from the list would be consulted for different issues or questions. The influence of pop stars and sports stars was only marginally important in the realms of fashion and fitness but took little importance in other areas. Hendry et al. concluded that adolescents make a rational selection from significant others, depending on their concern or their own particular needs at the time.

American and English young people present in a similar way in regard to their moving away from parental influence as they progress through adolescence (Marsland, 1987; Schonert-Reichl & Offer, 1992). One of the most readily noticeable changes in the world of the adolescent is the time spent with peers - in the classroom, and more so in this period of development - in social settings, both formal and informal. Schonert-Reichl and Offer state that adolescents spend twice as much
time with their friends than with their family and that these peer experiences fulfil a developmental need that cannot be filled by parents. Similar findings are reported by Montemayor and Van Komen (1980) who state their work demonstrates extensive "age-segregation" in American society and that the frequency of adolescent-adult interactions decreases through adolescence. This notion of decreasing interactions between adolescents and adults is mirrored in English research by Marsland who states:

The crucial social meaning of youth is withdrawal from adult control and influence compared with childhood. Peer groups are the milieu into which young people withdraw. Time and space is handed over to young people to work out for themselves in auto-socialization the developmental problems of self and identity which cannot be handled by the simple direct socialization appropriate to childhood. (Marsland, 1987, p. 12)

An argument against the age-segregation hypothesis is found in the work of Blyth et al. (1982) and in a Norwegian study by Bo (1989). These studies found that adolescents listed many significant adults in their lives, saw adolescent-adult relationships as important and indicated regard for and need of adults in their lives. Hendry, Shucksmith and Love (1989) argue that, for adolescents who attend organised youth clubs or similar organisations, the opportunity for regular interaction with nonfamilial adults and the opportunity for continued alignment with peers is extended.

Parents, peers and nonparental adults can offer social support to early adolescents. These people are then, either directly or indirectly, influencing the young person in their identity development. There is not strong support for the idea that there is specialisation in the type of support offered by different groups to the early adolescent. There may be some level of specialisation but there is a considerable degree of overlap in the functions filled by different people (Munsch & Blyth, 1993). When specifically considering the social support provided by others and its positive effect for the young person “it appears that the decision to mobilize someone may be of greater consequence for the adolescent than the decision to mobilize a specific relationship” (Munsch & Blyth, 1993, p. 149). It has also been noted that if high–risk adolescents are able to draw on a number of informal sources of support they are more likely to develop in a psychologically healthy way (Quinton & Rutter, 1988; Schonert-Reichl & Offer, 1992).

Nonparental adults, for example, relatives, family friends, teachers, coaches or youth leaders, do play an important role in the lives of early adolescents as important people in the young person’s social networks (Blyth et al., 1982). This
finding was reinforced in research conducted by Munsch and Blyth (1993) that found 7th and 8th graders reported a high level of support from nonparental adults similar, in some dimensions, to the support offered by mothers and exceeding, on most dimensions, the support offered by fathers. Hendry et al. (1992) describe the characteristics of significant adults (relatives or nonrelatives) that young people stated as most important as, enabler, teacher, supporter, believer and, to a lesser extent, role model and challenger. They found that “the most important of these characteristics is believer” (p. 268). It is clear from this, and other research, that young people appreciate being appreciated and that they like having others who take them seriously and value them as well as have confidence in them (Martino & Palotta-Chiarolli, 2001).

It could be reasonably expected that teachers would play a significant role in the lives of early adolescents as they have such extended periods of time with young people and they are in positions traditionally seen as of importance in the development of their students. Contrary to this belief, Galbo (1989) reports that “teachers are seldom found to be significant for a large portion of adolescents (approximately 10% of all significant adults)” (p. 5). Hendry et al. (1992) state that teachers do not play a supportive role in the lives of their adolescent students. Other research also reports limited influence of school-based personnel on children and adolescents. “With respect to children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of the important adults in the school setting, 12% of elementary children and 5% of senior high school students reported that they would turn to teachers or coaches for advice” (Schonert-Reichl & Offer, 1992, p. 33).

It may be assumed from these findings that the influence of teachers and others in schools is limited and decreases throughout the secondary schooling years. But a significant longitudinal study of adolescent girls who were raised in alternate care settings (Quinton & Rutter, 1988) showed that teachers, other school related personnel and care-providers other than parents, did provide, for some of the girls interviewed, important support and encouragement. These positive relationships with nonparental significant adults offered the girls an opportunity to make important life decisions and take a positive path or trajectory (Robins & Rutter, 1990; Rutter, 1987). The structure and nature of adolescents’ future social networks in adult life may also be influenced by the relationship they have with nonparental significant adults during the adolescent years (Beam et al., 2002).

In conclusion, this paper raises the issue of who are the significant, nonparental adults in the lives of early adolescents in contemporary western society. What is required is research that asks adolescents to name and describe who are the
very important adults in their lives. Such findings could assist researchers in considering the influence these adults may have on the identity development of adolescents.

References


