

## Chapter 8

# Family

Family is one of the key loci of transition to adulthood projects. It is both a focus of transition, that is, developing new relationships between family members as one becomes an adult, and a support through which other transitions can be achieved, for example, living independently and entry into world of full-time work. Although it is consistent with action theory to expect a multitude of transition-related joint actions, projects, and communication to occur across the family system and sub-systems within the family, empirical research using the action-project method to study family transition-to-adulthood projects has focused exclusively on the parent–youth sub-system. Thus, it is this sub-system that is the focus of this chapter. However, it is important to understand that other family relationships can be just as important. For example, when the youngest child in a family begins her transition to adulthood, joint transition projects with an older sister are likely to be a vital part of her transition process. Thus, additional research is needed about transition projects between youths and family sub-systems other than their parents. However, there is solid empirical evidence about the nature of family transition projects that occur between these individuals and their parents.

Existing literature reveals that youths and their parents must establish new ways of interacting and relating to each other, as their relationship transforms from that of adult–child to adult–adult. The amount of contact between youths and their families decreases from age 17 to 27 (Sneed et al., 2006). During the transition, parents, and youths continue to experience conflict about a wide range of issues (Renk et al., 2006). However, the level of conflict reduces as the youths reach adulthood (Levitt, Silver, & Santos, 2007; Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003) and complete developmental tasks, such as marriage/cohabitation and obtaining full-time employment (Aquilino, 1997; Buhl, 2007). However, this improvement in family relationships does not appear to be universal. Instead, it varies according to individual characteristics of the youth and parent, particularly the gender of youth and parent (Buhl, 2007; Levitt et al., 2007; McKinney & Renk, 2008; Osgood et al., 2005a; Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003).

Parents sometimes find it difficult to shift from previous patterns of control and protectiveness, or even to know what level of involvement and control is appropriate (Jones, O’Sullivan, & Rouse, 2006). Indeed, they may disagree with each

other, and certainly with their children, about whether their children have attained adult status (Nelson et al., 2007). This is particularly salient, given other research indicating that the way parents conduct their parenting affects youths' emotional adjustment during the transition to adulthood (McKinney & Renk, 2008), and that the amount of support parents provide influences youths' psychological adjustment (Holahan et al., 1994). Similarly, the degree of parents' and youths' satisfaction with their relationship and mutual communication influences the youths' sense of self-worth (Agliata & Renk, 2008), psychological adjustment (O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996), and well-being (Knoester, 2003) during this developmental period. Although research on the effects of youths' transition to adulthood on their parents is more limited, there are some indications from the Jones et al. and Knoester studies that relationship quality also affects parents' psychological functioning. Thus, the transition to adulthood is not only a time when relationships within the family change, but how those relationships change and develop has important consequences for youths', and possibly also parents' psychological health and functioning.

## Domains of Projects and Actions

Transition to adulthood is also a time when parents and youth are actively involved with each other, engaged in projects related to youths' transition to adulthood. Empirical evidence has identified some of the domains in which family transition to adulthood projects occur: career development, education, health/safety, and relationship. Within each of these domains, families formulate projects with specific goals that reflect their individual life contexts, and engage in a wide range of joint actions related to their projects. Families often work on multiple projects at once, and sometimes a single project will span several different domains. For example, a family transition project with the goal of deciding what program of study a youth should pursue spans the domains of education and career promotion.

The specific actions undertaken within the various transition projects are myriad. In addition to achieving project goals within a particular domain, these joint actions often also reflect an underlying process of negotiating who has control and responsibility for that domain of the youth's life. Within the North American cultural context, most families are in agreement that, in adulthood, individuals should have full control and responsibility for their own lives. Indeed, autonomy from parents and being able to take responsibility for the various domains of living are defining characteristics of adulthood in the United States (e.g., Aronson, 2008b) and Canada (e.g., Molgat, 2007). The transition to adulthood period is the time when youths learn to take more responsibility for themselves and parents learn to give up control over more aspects of the youths' lives (e.g., Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004).

This change in control and responsibility is evident in the actions that family members take to achieve their transition projects. The discussion and negotiation actions that are evident in all domains of projects frequently have a consultative

tone, where youths and parents are considered to be generally equal partners in the conversation. As one mother from our research described it:

The purpose is, like, to sort through all the stuff, right, and to get to a place where it's realistic, and you're both happy, or, you know, I'm as happy as I can be, or confident as I can be, that she's gonna succeed, and she's as happy as she can. [My daughter]'s gonna go with her plan, and it's something she wants to do, it's no use making it, you know, imposing your plan on a kid. But if she's gonna go out, go to university, yeah, it's a big focus, you talk a lot about it.

This is a change from how they would have interacted earlier in life: project-related discussions between parents and younger adolescents are frequently initiated and led by parents, with adolescents more often agreeing or acquiescing to their parents' opinions (e.g., Young et al., 2003, 2006). The parent's adjustment to children transitioning, taking control of one's own life, and adopting more adult responsibilities is sometimes an explicit focus of joint projects at this developmental stage. As one of the mothers who participated in our study stated, "there's a lot of emotional work involved in the transition; the changing parenting role, and moving, her actually physically leaving the household." Another parent conceptualized this "parenting project" as a balancing act between trying to actively encourage, guide, and support the daughter's growth into adulthood, while also allowing her daughter to proceed at her own pace, trusting that the daughter will eventually make the right choices.

The transfer of responsibility and control is also evident in other kinds of project-related actions. For example, a mother who teaches her older adolescent daughter about budgeting as part of a career development project is preparing the daughter to take more responsibility over finances in the future. Similarly, a project in the health domain, where the pattern of action changes from youths relying on parents to monitor and control their exposure to ultraviolet radiation in sunlight to having the youths managing their own sun exposure with occasional parental reminders reflects a transfer of responsibility for this aspect of the youth's life. Family members' resistance to new patterns of control and responsibility also emerges through their project-related actions. Sometimes, it is the youth who is not interested in taking more responsibility, as in the case of a son resisting his parents' efforts to encourage him to move out, at least in part out of a desire to maintain a close relationship with them. At other times, it is the parent who resists releasing control, such as a mother who is driven to spend 5 hours with her son planning out possible course timetables in university, because she is worried that he will not select all the appropriate prerequisites for entry into medical school.

### ***Career Development***

One of the key tasks of becoming an adult is to achieve financial independence from one's family, usually by obtaining full-time, long-term employment (e.g., Aronson, 2008a). The connections between action, work, and the transition to adulthood are discussed more fully in [Chapter 9](#). It must be understood, however, that family often

plays an important role in this process of transitioning to the world of work. Parents and youth engage in a range of projects to promote the youth's career development during the transition to adulthood. This is a process that begins well before the transition to adulthood itself, with research revealing that parents and adolescents as young as 13 or 14 engage in family projects focused on exploring different possibilities for future work and career (Domene, Arim, & Young, 2007; Young, Valach, et al., 2001, 2006).

Family transition projects where the specific focus is on exploring different occupational paths persist during the transition to adulthood. In these kinds of exploratory projects, the underlying goal appears to be to ensure that multiple future possibilities remain open to the youth or, in some cases, to increase the salience of multiple different occupations for the youth, particularly in situations where the youth has few ideas about what career paths to take. Career exploration family transition projects are sometimes oriented toward increasing youths' general experience with the world of work and acquainting them the responsibilities associated with a job, rather than focusing on their longer-term career options. For example, for one youth who decided to live at home while attending university and working part-time, the family negotiated for him to pay rent as part of a strategy to develop responsible management of the youth's income.

Young and colleagues (2008) have identified a range of actions undertaken to achieve career exploration goals within family transition projects: active discussion about different occupations and their requirements, and searching together for online career information resources, arranging household schedules to permit the youth to work part time, discussing together practical aspects of holding down a job (e.g., getting to and from work with limited transportation options, money management strategies), and conducting mock job interviews together. Parents are also involved in their older adolescent children's career exploration through such actions as obtaining information about the characteristics and requirements of different occupations for the youths to consider, and assisting them to obtain summer employment or volunteer work to enrich their life experience before permanent entry to the world of work.

However, transition to adulthood projects within the domain of career development are not exclusively oriented toward exploration and expanding options. Some families are more interested in narrowing down possibilities to find the right occupation for the youth or, having already settled upon a particular occupation, working together to help the youth achieve the goal of entering that profession. To achieve these career progress types of family transition projects, parents and youth engage in a wide range of actions, reflecting the individual contexts of their specific circumstances. For example, when there is disagreement between a youth and his or her parents over the youth's chosen career path, their joint action may primarily take the form of argument and marshalling evidence in an attempt to convince each other about the appropriateness of a career choice. In families where youths are pursuing an athletic, dance, music, or other career requiring long hours of practice, parents may support them by driving them to rehearsals, become involved in coaching, attending competitions, and sharing relevant experiences from their own

lives. These youths may even permit their parents to retain a high level of control in other areas of their lives in order to maintain focus on their chosen career path. For example, one young participant in our research, who planned to become an Olympic athlete, relied on her mother to schedule her time and shop for her clothes. Despite these variations, there are some patterns of action that occur in most, if not all, transition projects with goals related to making progress along a specific career path. Specifically, youths tend to seek career-related advice and assistance from their parents, who respond by providing information and emotional support. Parents will also sometimes serve as a “sounding-board” for their older adolescent children, and sometimes encourage and “push” them to pursue their aspirations.

### ***Education***

Another domain of life that becomes important during the transition to adulthood is the youth’s education. Completing one’s education is one of the traditional indicators of the entry into adulthood (Hogan & Astone, 1986), although the connection between school completion and adult status may no longer be clear-cut (e.g., Arnett, 1997; Shanahan, 2000). Nevertheless, current research reveals that parents are actively involved with their older adolescent children in pursuing a range of transition to adulthood projects with goals related to the youth’s education (Young et al., 2008). In some families, particularly those in which the youth is struggling academically, family transition projects in the education domain may focus on the successful completion of high school. Projects in this domain can also take the form of gaining entry into post-secondary education programs and dealing with the changes associated with the youth reaching that stage of development. For example, one dyad explicitly stated that their project was focused on “engaging in making decisions around, and adjusting to the idea of [the daughter] going to university.” Joint actions that support these kinds of transition projects include parental monitoring of youths’ academic performance, negotiating appropriate levels of extracurricular involvement to promote school success, searching for different schools together and discussing the relative merits of those schools, parents assisting youths to complete application forms, and making arrangements to finance the youth’s education.

Families continue to engage in education-oriented transition projects after the youth has entered university. These projects may involve such goals as maintaining the youth’s success and well-being while in university, and facilitating a smooth school-to-work transition. Actions taken to achieve projects within the domain of education include renegotiation of the parents’ and youths’ financial responsibilities for schooling, discussing choice of major and graduate school options, and youths reporting how they are doing to their parents. These kinds of family transition projects can persist even when youths move away from home to pursue their education. Although opportunities for joint action diminish, the use of technologies such as telephone and instant messaging make it possible to engage in ongoing conversation regardless of geographic distance. For example, in our studies, one young

woman, who moved away to another province for university, maintained regular telephone contact with her mother to share her experiences at university, discuss her academic progress, and seek her mother's advice and support with problems that she encountered.

Within the education domain, family transition projects tend to become particularly salient when the youth is preparing to graduate high school or enter post-secondary education, and when youths are experiencing difficulty with their schooling. When schooling is progressing well or when no major decisions need to be made, these projects tend to recede into the background of the family's life together. In this situation, other project domains begin to take precedence and there are large periods of time when there is relatively little joint action between family members concerning educational success (although, youths would presumably remain engaged in individual action and action with other parties, such as professors and classmates, to make progress on their education).

### *Health/Safety*

In many families, promoting and maintaining the youth's health and safety is an important goal that parents and youths seek to achieve in their joint transition to adulthood projects (Valach et al., 1996). Family transition projects within the domain of health and safety are sometimes oriented to specific issues in the youths' lives. Research has revealed that some families engage in projects focused on the reduction of sun exposure and prevention of skin cancer (Young, Logan, Lovato, Moffat, & Shoveller, 2005), and ensuring that the youth does not become involved in illicit drug use (Graham et al., 2008). Similar projects are likely to occur in families where other specific health concerns form part of the life context of the individual. Thus, it would not be surprising to encounter families where the parents and youths are jointly engaged in health-related transition projects around diabetes management, anorexia recovery projects, exercise promotion, or smoking cessation. Other families engage in projects where ensuring the youths' physical safety becomes a goal. For example, as one of our participants took increasing responsibility and control over her own schedule and transportation, the issue of working alone late at night and how to get home safely from her job became an important focus of the transition-to-adulthood project in which she engaged with her mother.

Youths and their parents engage in a wide variety of actions in pursuit of their projects within the domain of family health and safety. Discussion of health issues and negotiation of family members' roles and responsibilities in maintaining health and safety is common (Young et al., 2005, 2008). Parents took the lead in providing information, for example, some parents passed on information about daily UV index to children. They also provided pragmatic assistance to their older adolescent children, for example, driving them home when out late at night. At the same time, youth took on increasing self-governance for this domain as they become older, sometimes resulting in decreased engagement with their parents as other priorities

begin to take precedence. For example, at the end of her research involvement, one young woman, who described herself as “I’m playing the ‘just-turned 19’ game, so going to clubs all the time,” characterized her communication with her mother as “it’s really hard, cuz I get annoyed with her really easily in our conversations, like at home whenever I talk to her, I’m just like ‘shut up, like don’t talk to me. Just leave me alone’ and I get really really edgy with her.” This was in striking contrast to how she had perceived herself 8 months earlier, before she had become involved in the nightclub scene:

I can be independent when I need to be independent, but I’m very dependent, like. (laughs)  
It’s more like, I’m kind of needy when it comes to my mom, like, I’ll come home from work and like come and snuggle with her, and like, if I’m sick, like I like, I need like five hugs a day and like that kind of stuff, like it’s more like an emotional thing.

## Family and Relationship as an Overarching Project

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, family is not only the locus and the agent through which other transition to adulthood projects are accomplished, but also family and the relationships among the family members can also be the focus of the family actions and goals during this developmental period. Notwithstanding the biological dimensions of who is the child and who is the parent in a family, the structure of any social agents or actors is defined by the tasks of such a group. The family has long-term tasks covered by the family career, midterm tasks as in family projects and short-term tasks of family actions. It also should not be forgotten that these joint processes are also performed by individual members who link their individual actions to the joint actions of the family. Thus a particular organization of a family for certain tasks – be it an action or a project is also anchored in individual actions with their subjective processes.

Consequently, an individual might develop certain liking or dislike for a certain family organization, which may precipitate a conflict that needs to be addressed. Consider a family dynamic where a father leads a young boy in leisure activities. This allows the father to participate in enjoyable activities as he leads, such as fishing, sports, and driving, gives him the stronger position of a skillful, informed, and successful player, earns him admiration as an involved parent, and provides him with a loyal follower, namely, his son. Being observed by the mother, who does not actively participate but also adds to the admiration that he receives, such a family structure is very appealing for the father. However, the father’s attempt to apply this action structure when the son is older may be less successful because the task structure is different. The father’s attempts to direct the son and take the lead throughout these interactions, which worked for their leisure time when the son was younger, are likely to be met with resistance and heightened emotions on all sides. The son has become more interested in trying out his own problem-solving capacities (rather than being shown what to do), and wants to use this task for gaining more autonomy. Thus, one of the projects the family has to address during the youth’s transition to the adulthood is the further development of the family itself.

How are family members going to recognize the important tasks in this part of the family career, understand the requirements for certain family structure, and manage to restructure family processes within the family career accordingly? As indicated in the previous example, it is not only a question of finding the rational means for certain goals but also dealing with the co-occurring emotions. Gatherings, rituals, and celebrations help in marking certain transitions or ending of an old process and beginning of a new one, with the understanding that new family tasks are due and thus a restructuring of the family is required. Their significance is augmented when family members make special efforts to attend. Other transition processes can occur simultaneously, for example, a family illness or the death of a parent. Sometimes events like the parents' divorce are actually postponed to the time when the youth finishes school, that is, the time of the youth's transition to adulthood.

Steering processes in the families also change during the transition to adulthood, requiring that new procedures be established. Equally, goal-setting processes in families must be substantially revised in response to family changes. Family actions also need to accommodate the development of autonomy and responsibility in the youth; goal-setting and carrying out projects between parents and older adolescents are very different from the way these processes occurred when the adolescents were much younger. Equally, control processes, being closely linked to the control processes in individual action, must cater to the changed control capacities of an individual who is no longer a child, but is in the middle of becoming an adult. Family control processes that are detrimental to the project of developing the youth's autonomy will be counterproductive. Regulation processes in the family must also change during the transition to adulthood. For example, physically preventing a child from doing something, a useful strategy at earlier developmental stages, is unlikely to result in successful outcomes during the transition to adulthood; grabbing a 7-year-old's hands to prevent her from throwing food at a sibling might ensure a more pleasant meal-time, but attempting to physically restrain an 17-year old from leaving the table while her father is in the middle of lecturing about the advantages of law as a profession is unlikely to work. Although trivial, these examples illustrate the importance of regulating family actions and projects and demonstrate the necessity of developing regulation strategies that are acceptable to all family members.

Maintaining a good relationship or improving a problematic one in the family may be similar to the function of individual emotions, that is, serving to energize actions and projects, in terms of the family atmosphere. Individual emotions should be unburdened from past traumas and future anxieties to be able to monitor the actual here and now situation of an action. Such emotions energize as well as calm actors through a mildly positive view of the past and confident hope for the future (Valach, Young, et al., 2002). Similarly, the family atmosphere should be free from the interference of old conflicts and traumas, suggesting that the present state of affairs can provide security for the future and a contended way of looking back.

Indeed, our research has revealed that focusing on the relationships within the family is an important project for many families during the transition to adulthood. These projects typically have the goal of developing ways of relating that reflect changes in youths' developmental stage (from adolescent to adult), and life circumstances such as moving out of the family home or entering the world of work.



Family transition projects within the relationship domain are often motivated by a desire to maintain existing emotional connections and quality of communication as the youth transitions to adulthood. The situation is different for families experiencing problematic emotional connections or communication. They still express a desire to find new ways to relate to each other, but many only partially achieve this goal, or find unanticipated solutions. For example, in one of our families, the action of the daughter moving out of the family home was perceived by her parents as achieving progress on their relationship project because it led to fewer opportunities to fight with each other.

Parents and youth who have a positive relationship may be concerned that, as the youth separates from the family, the parent–youth relationship will diminish. In such circumstances, as we have seen in our data, some parents and youth focused on maintaining their positive relationship as part of the transition to adulthood project. In other families we found that separation and decreasing contact was the parent–youth joint goal, because doing so appeared to reduce emotionally distressing interactions.

The kinds of actions that families undertake to achieve relationship goals are similar to those undertaken to pursue transition-to-adulthood projects in other life domains. Parents and adolescents actively discuss the quality of their mutual relationship and their hopes for what the relationship will be in the future. It should be noted, however, that they sometimes disagree with each other, such as one family in our research where the mother desired an ongoing close connection with her daughter after she left for university, but the daughter was convinced that she would not miss her mother or spend much time in contact. In this family, working through the disagreement and negotiating a mutually agreeable vision for their future relations became a focus in itself.

Young and colleagues' (2008) research revealed that, in addition to conversation and occasional arguments, parents and youths engage in other activities designed to maintain or improve their mutual relationship. These kinds of family transition projects are often supported through intentionally spending leisure time together, for example, going for long walks together; having special dinners together to celebrate accomplishments, and holidaying together. Families sometimes perceive the process of youths taking on more household responsibilities, such as taking the family car in for servicing or looking after younger relatives when extended family visit, to be actions contributing to relationship maintenance or improvement. These actions not only reduce daily burdens, but are often conducted in response to parents' requests for assistance. For some parents and youth, particularly young women, a close mutual relationship is also encouraged by choosing to engage together in spiritual activities such as praying together, attending temple together, and jointly engaging in acts of service (Domene, Socholotiuk, & Young, in press).

Occasionally, family members will take action to force a sudden change in relationship. For example, in one of our studies, a youth chose to pursue university at an institution that was geographically distance from the family home, despite the added financial burden, because of her relationship with her mother. She stated, "I would really rather live by myself; or with a roommate or something like that. Just 'cause

I like, I really like change and . . . I just . . . I just can't do it. (laughs) [Living with her] would just be too much," and "I don't get homesick, or anything like that, or like mother-sick or father-sick . . . one summer I went to my Dad's for the whole summer in California, and I didn't miss my Mom. My friends, and my brother and that was about it. My cat." Another youth moved in with her romantic partner due to ongoing conflict with her parents, and a third decided to live with his father in response to the pressure and control that he perceived his mother to be exerting over him. Presumably, sudden relationship change can also be initiated by parents, through such actions as presenting their child with an ultimatum of getting a job or moving out. In other families, the development of a new relationship is much more gradual, with youths and parents slowly developing new ways of relating to each other as the youths become more autonomous.

Family transition-to-adulthood projects in the relationship domain are not isolated from projects in other domains of the youth's life; parents and youths engage in joint action that can simultaneously promote their mutual relationship and advance the goals of projects in other domains. Additionally, examining the relative priorities that families give to their various projects, it appears that projects with relationship goals form a super-ordinate project that often encompasses and enters into transition projects with career development, education, and health/safety goals.

Conversations and other joint activities that take place in other domains can also provide an opportunity to maintain connection and relationship with each other. Sharing one's career aspirations with one's parents or safety-related fears with one's children requires a certain degree of vulnerability and trust, as does requesting assistance or offering suggestions. In turn, if this vulnerability and trust are respected by other family members, the action can forge closer connections within the family. Additionally, successfully accomplishing goals after an extended mutual effort together, for example, earning a scholarship after spending substantial time together to prepare applications or becoming proficient in another language that the parent has taught the youth, can also improve the quality of the parent-child relationship. Finally, maintenance of a close relationship is sometimes an explicit component of projects that are ostensibly focused on other life domains. Choosing indoor joint leisure activities, for example, ones that limit exposure to sunlight, not only allows parents and adolescents to support each other in achieving health-related goals, but also provides an opportunity to connect with each other. Similarly, many of the conversations about which universities the youth should attend (observed in the Young et al., 2008 study) included explicit discussion about the possibility of moving away and how this would impact the parents and youths' mutual relationship.

## **Degree of Focus in Family Transition to Adulthood Projects**

Research on the joint projects that parents engage in with younger adolescents has revealed that family projects vary systematically according to the degree they are specific and focused (Domene & Young, 2008). That is, in some families, goals

are clearly specified and focused, people tended to engage frequently in activities related to their projects, and substantial progress is usually made in achieving their goals. In other families, projects tend to be ill-defined or understood differently by different family members, project-related actions occurred sporadically and appeared to be separate from people's daily living, and family members often had difficulty with managing conflict and regulating their emotions. The same patterns of being focused or unfocused may carry over to the projects parents and older adolescents, including family transition-to-adulthood projects.

Indeed, dyads in our studies varied widely in terms of how focused their transition-to-adulthood projects were. For example, in one focused family, their project was clearly defined as "working together toward [the son's] increasing responsibilities as an adult, including developing the skills that he needs to manage his new roles; and negotiating his level of independence." Mother and son had a clear, congruent understanding of what this project involved, and that working together to achieve it would primarily involve the mother being actively involved in the son's life, providing advice, assistance, and guidance, and the son keeping his mother informed about and involved in the different areas of his life, for example, school, work, and management of finances. This dyad engaged in many conversations and other joint activities over the course of their research involvement, with the mother drawing back from her involvement over time, as the son demonstrated increasing competence at managing the various areas of his life. Despite this transfer of responsibility, even at the end of their research involvement, the son maintained a desire to remain connected to his mother and to hear her opinion. For example, in their final research interview, he discussed his new girlfriend with his mother, and subsequently reflected, "Yeah, I switched girlfriends, and . . . mom's seen her a couple times already. So, I'm just asking her, like, what she thinks about her because, like, parents have a say in your life. I take her opinion into account."

In contrast, a mother and son with a similar project, namely, "discussing [the son's] current activities and his exploration of future work possibilities and negotiating independence and responsibilities," had somewhat dissonant understandings of what each other's roles were in this joint project. Mother and son tended to be minimally involved in pursuing that transition-to-adulthood project over the course of their research involvement. Rather than engaging in discussion and activities together, the son's primary strategy was to pursue independence by seeking increased privacy and not sharing things with his mother. The mother sometimes sought to exert more control over her son but at other times made little contact with him, due to her busy work schedule. There was also some evidence of communication difficulties. In observed conversations with each other, they interacted in a tense and awkward way, with the mother pressing for information and trying to steer the discussion toward the son's future, while the son responded minimally and engaged in joking, teasing, and frequent switching of topics. Not surprisingly, at the end of their research involvement, this family reported achieving relatively little progress in terms of promoting the son's transition to adulthood.

Despite the wide range of experiences that may occur when a project is focused versus diffuse, the existing research indicates that parents play an integral role in the

transition-to-adulthood process for many youths. During this developmental period, parents and youths formulate a wide range of joint projects related to the youths' future and taking on adult roles, including projects in the career development, education, health/safety, and relationship domains. The actions that parents and youths undertake together to achieve their project-related goals are also varied, reflecting the specific life circumstances of the individual families. Nevertheless, discussion, in the form of conversation and sometimes argument, appears to be one type of action that most parents and youths engage in as part of their family transition projects. Similarly, even when projects are explicitly focused on achieving goals in other domains, their projects appear to be embedded within an overarching context of maintaining or improving the quality of their mutual relationship during this time of change. These processes are evident in the following case study, which also illustrates how the process can unfold in unique ways in specific families.

## Case Study

The transition-to-adulthood project of Jenny and her mother, Lin, was monitored over a period of 8 months. Jenny is the eldest daughter (19 years old) in a family of four, and lives at home with her mother, father, and a 13-year-old sister. At the beginning of their research involvement, Jenny was attending university full-time (first year, studying sciences), and not employed. Her aspirations for the future include completing her degree and possibly pursuing graduate studies, getting married and having children, and pursuing a career. Lin was 48 years old and works as a technician at a research institute. She was very involved in her church, and her religious beliefs inform every aspect of her life, including how she raises her children, how she understands the world, and her future orientation. In terms of her educational background, Lin has a bachelor's degree. The family immigrated to Canada from China 13 years ago, when Jenny was 6 years old. They are ethnic Chinese and continue to speak Mandarin in the family home. Both parents were employed, and they reported having a combined family income of greater than \$75,000 per year.

Jenny and Lin articulated a broad and general family transition-to-adulthood project that spans several different domains of life, "Working together to support [Jenny] in pursuing her dreams and goals, and with God's guidance to implement her path in life over the next several years, which includes education, marriage, children, and career." Lin viewed her own role in the project as that of (a) maintaining a close connection and active involvement in her daughter's life, through ongoing conversations about Jenny's daily activities and concerns, and continually providing instrumental and emotional support; (b) providing Jenny with experiences that will prepare her for the future, for example, encouraging Jenny to take charge of a family business in the summer; and (c) trying to form a new way of relating to Jenny where Lin exerts less control over her daughter's life, which is a struggle, given her perception that Jenny remains a child in some ways, and her worries about her daughter's health and safety. Jenny perceived her role to be one of intentionally broadening her

life experiences, for example, experiencing adult responsibilities through running a small business and getting involved in extracurricular activities to develop greater social skills, and thoughtfully reflecting on those experiences. Jenny also seeks and receives support and encouragement from her mother, which she views as important for her growth into adulthood. She also regards her faith in God as a critical component of her development that sustains her in every challenge she faces.

This conceptualization is representative of the transition-to-adulthood projects of many parents and youth. The two have developed goals related to Jenny's future education and career, as well as the domain of marriage and having children. Intriguingly, this focus on marriage and children was absent from most families in Young and colleagues' (2008) study. This general absence supports Arnett's (2006) claim that marriage is no longer considered to be an essential marker of the transition to adulthood by youth in North America. The fact that it emerged as an important theme for Jenny and her mother may, in part, be due to their Chinese cultural heritage.

Additionally, although they did not explicitly include it in their statement of their transition-to-adulthood project, it became evident that their mutual relationship is an integral part of their joint project. Jenny's perspective on the mutual relationship changed over time: after living away from home for the first time over the summer holidays, Jenny became interested in maintaining higher levels of privacy and independence and became less satisfied with living at home. Similarly, in self-confrontation interviews, Lin spoke about needing to find new ways to relate and interact with Jenny across the various domains of her daughter's life; new ways that reflected Jenny becoming more adult. Lin recognized that developing new ways of relating would require a shift in her behavior as a parent, and accepting the fact that Jenny is growing up. Despite the actions that mother and daughter took to develop more adult ways of relating to each other over time, Lin and Jenny both continued to perceive their relationship to be a close one at the end of their research involvement.

Their mutual relationship was also a means through which Jenny and Lin achieved other aspects of their transition to adulthood project. For example, over the course of their research involvement, they recorded having many conversations about the future. Lin also took opportunities to encourage and support her daughter when Jenny was experiencing times of struggle and distress in various domains of life, for example, losing interest and becoming dissatisfied at work, becoming anxious about mid-term exams and other schoolwork, expressing a desire to no longer be single. Even when Jenny moved away from home for the summer for work, the two maintained regular contact over the internet and by telephone.

The case of Jenny and Lin also illustrates how the transition to adulthood can be a family project, where parents have as much of a role to play as the youths themselves. Lin and Jenny jointly constructed an understanding of adulthood and goals to achieve that would promote Jenny's transition to adulthood. They were actively involved in pursuing their transition project conversing, with Lin and Jenny both developing new ways of relating to each other, while maintaining a close relationship where Lin was able to support Jenny when Jenny experienced times of struggle in the domains that they identified as important parts of becoming an adult. It must

be noted that this is a case where there was relatively little intra-familial conflict, and where the transition-to-adulthood project was a focused one. Where conflict is high or the degree of focus is low, there will still be engagement between parent and youth on goals related to transitioning to adulthood, but the way in which these projects are defined and acted upon may be rather different.

In conclusion, the case illustration used in this chapter exemplifies many aspects of a joint parent–youth transition to adulthood project: both parties are actively engaged in it, it is focused, there is virtually no conflict, their relationship is central, and changes within and between the parent and youth are experienced and observed in their 8-month involvement as research participants. At the same time, this case is not typical. The transition-to-adulthood project appears embedded in a larger religious faith project or career in this family. This larger project provided a good deal of meaning and motivation for specific transition-to-adulthood action, for example, the joint discussion of marriage and having children. Thus, this case illustrates how family, career, and other projects can be interwoven in unique ways in different families.

Throughout this chapter, we have pointed out a range of ways in which families are involved in transition-to-adulthood projects. This case is but one illustration of some of these ways. Other cases reported throughout this book illustrate various ways families are involved in transition-to-adulthood projects. In all of these cases, as we have reported elsewhere (Young et al., 2008), relationship, governance transfer, and concern with education and occupation are important themes of these projects.