# Morality in Adolescent-Parent Relationships

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# Adolescent Moral Development

- Focused primarily on prohibitions (“don’ts”)
- Substantially less attention to the “do’s” of development
  - E.g., the need to be compassionate, caring
- Interpersonal caring has been seen as a *superogatory expectation* (“nice to do”) rather than a *moral obligation (“ought to do”)*

# Adolescent Prosocial Moral Reasoning

- Research on prosocial moral reasoning (Eisenberg et al., 2006) has assumed that prosocial reasoning develops in progressive stages
- In contrast, other research has focused on how individuals weigh & coordinate different kinds of concerns in their judgments (more contextual)

# Adolescent Moral Development

- *Social domain research* has shown that teens view helping, caring as obligatory
  - When interpersonal needs are great (Neff, Turiel, & Anshel, 2002)
  - When interpersonal relationships are close (Killen & Turiel,1998)
- Different types of relationships (close friends, parent-child, spousal) have been examined
- Research has not specifically examined reasoning in the context of adolescent-parent relationships

# Parent-Adolescent Relationships

- Parent-child relationships are “closed field,” difficult to dissolve
- Behaviors that may disrupt more voluntary relationships may be tolerated
- Parents and teens can be ‘selfish’ & know that the relationship will endure

# Parent-Adolescent Relationships

- Parent-child relationships entail mutual obligations & reciprocal duties
- Parents are obligated to nurture and care for children
- Children have rights to self-determination (Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998)

# Study Aims

- To examine age-related, parent-teen, & contextual changes in judgments & reasoning about hypothetical situations where adolescents' & parents' needs conflict with personal desires
- *Novel Features:*
- We obtained teens' & parents' evaluations
  - Of situations where a parent (or teen) requests help
  - Teen (or parent) must give up personal desires to help
  - Included low & higher interpersonal need situations & a conventional situation
- We examined correlates of judgments

# Sample Demographics

- Family Sample ($n$ = 118 families)
  - 57 with 7th graders ($M$ = 12.32 years, $SD$ = .51)
    - 30 males, 27 females
  - 61 with 10th graders ($M$ = 15.18, $SD$ = .47)
    - 30 males, 31 females
  - 118 parents (mostly mothers)
- Primarily lower middle SES, European American (88%)
  - 9% African American, 3% Other
- College Student sample ($n$ = 48)
  - 23 males, 25 females ($M$ = 19.96, $SD$ = 1.30)

# Methods

- Parents and adolescents were individually interviewed during visits to our lab
- Audio-taped interviews were transcribed for coding
- Participants completed ratings of permissibility and selfishness
- Completed questionnaire assessments of family obligation, relationship quality (closeness & conflict), and behavioral autonomy

# Interview Stories (6)

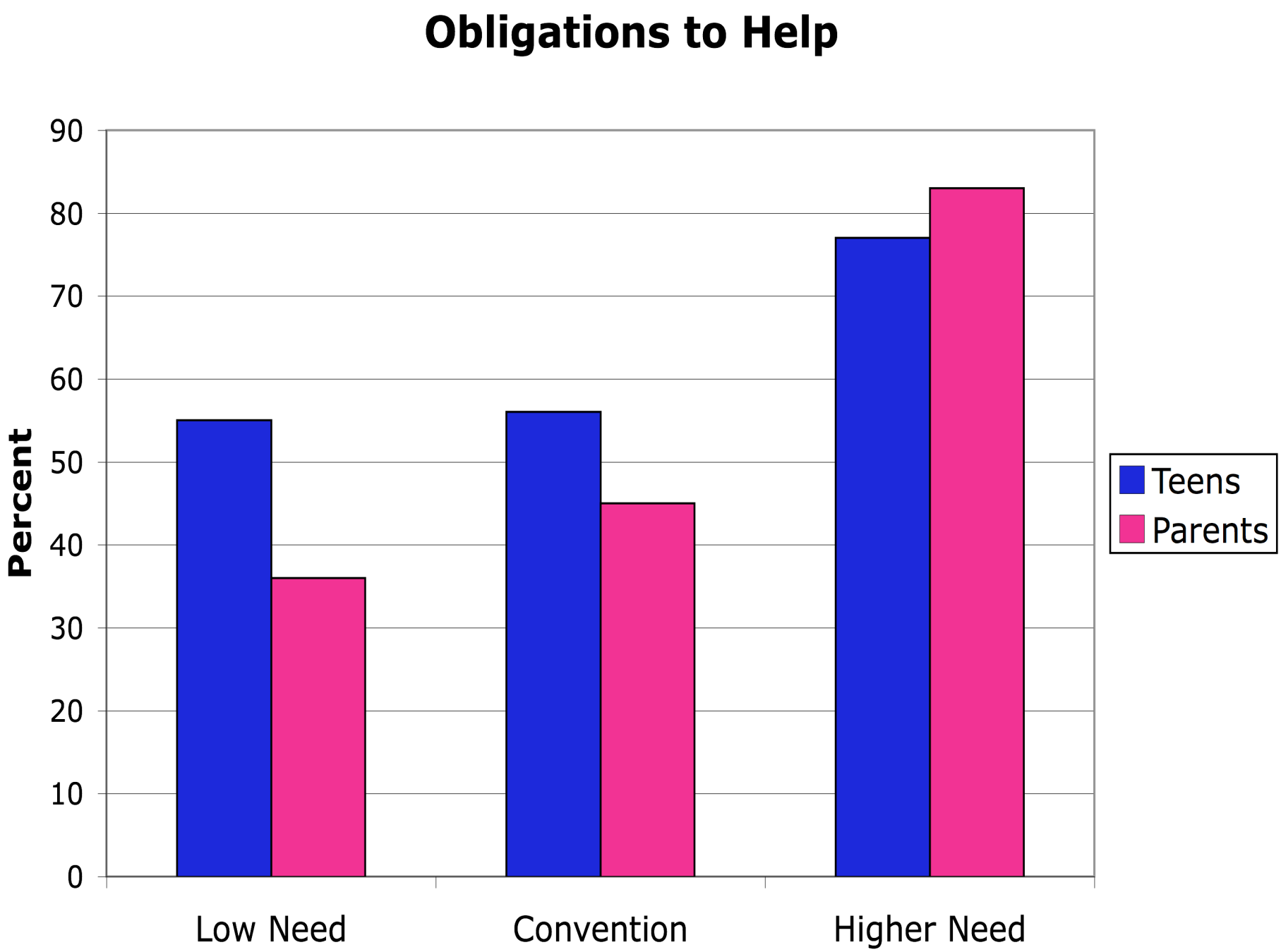
- Pit teen's or parent's needs or request against the other person's desires
  - 3 stories - teen needs help/makes request
  - 3 stories - parent needs help/makes request
- Teen protagonist's sex matched to participant
- Stories presented in counterbalanced order

# Interview Stories

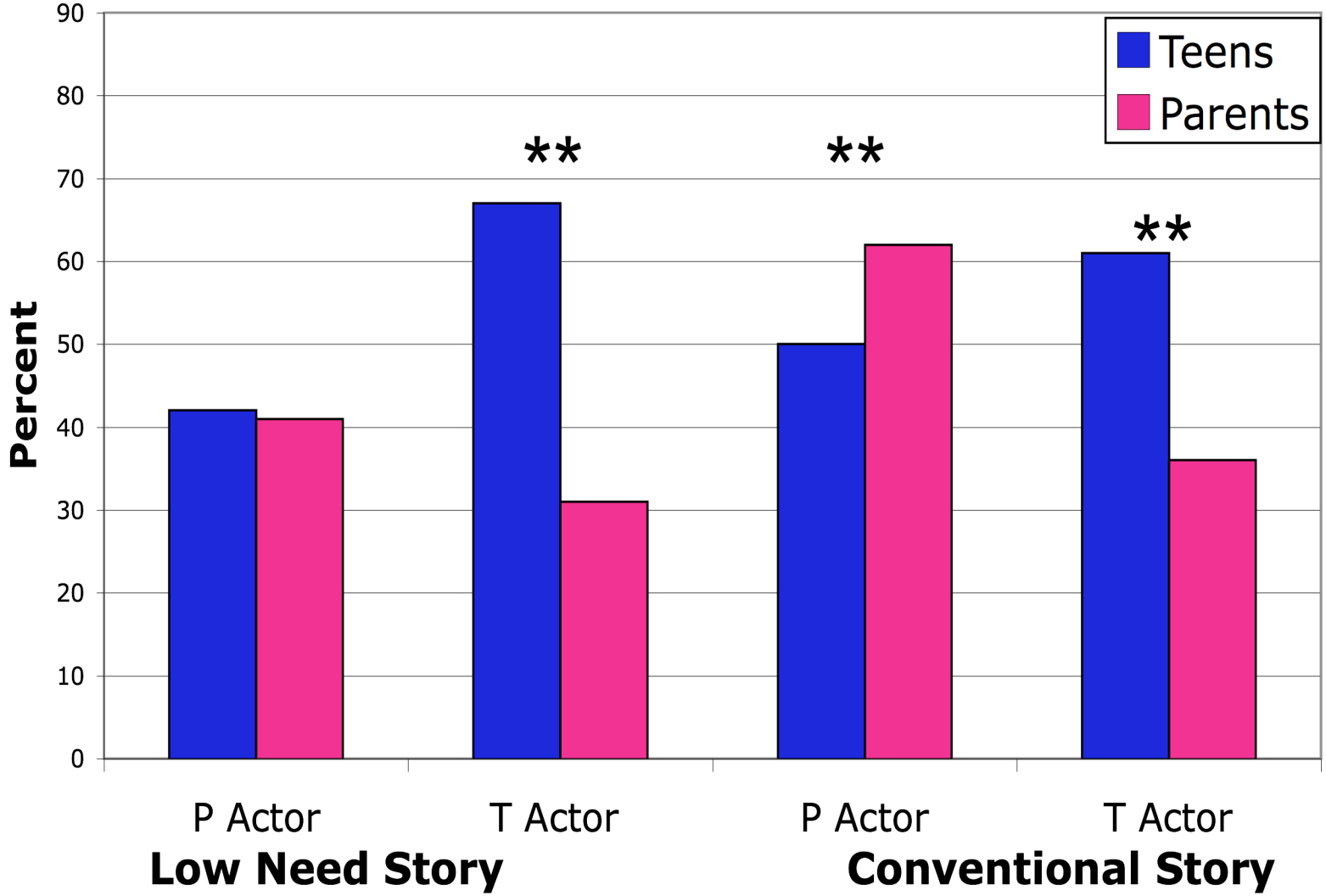
- Interpersonal/Personal (Low Need)
  - Parent: Give up going to theater to attend school auction (teen was minimally involved)
  - Teen: Given up going to movie to stay home for furniture delivery
- Interpersonal/Personal (Higher Need)
  - Parent: Help teen with act in talent show instead of going to book club
  - Teen: Help with holiday party instead of sledding
- Conventional/Personal
  - Parent: Change embarrassing clothes to go to school soccer game
  - Teen: Change casual clothes to visit grandparents

# Assessments

- Judgment: Should protagonist help/assist?
- Justifications for judgments: Why?
- Permissibility (5-pt scale): How permissible (OK) is it to satisfy personal desire?
- Selfishness (5-pt scale): How selfish is it (for actor) to satisfy personal desires?

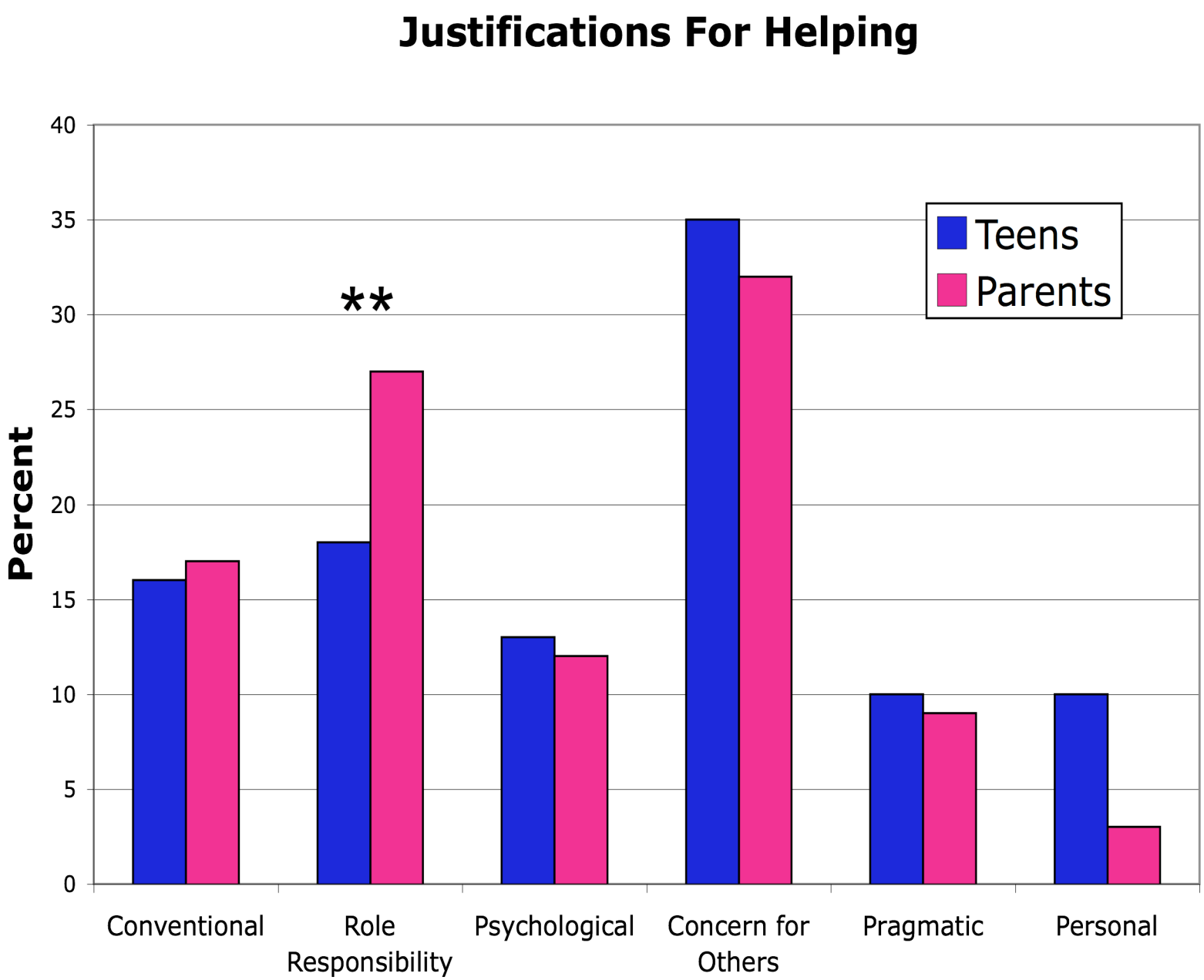

Obligations to Help
Percent
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Low Need
Convention
Higher Need
Teens
Parents

# Obligations to Help - Lower Need and Conventional Situations

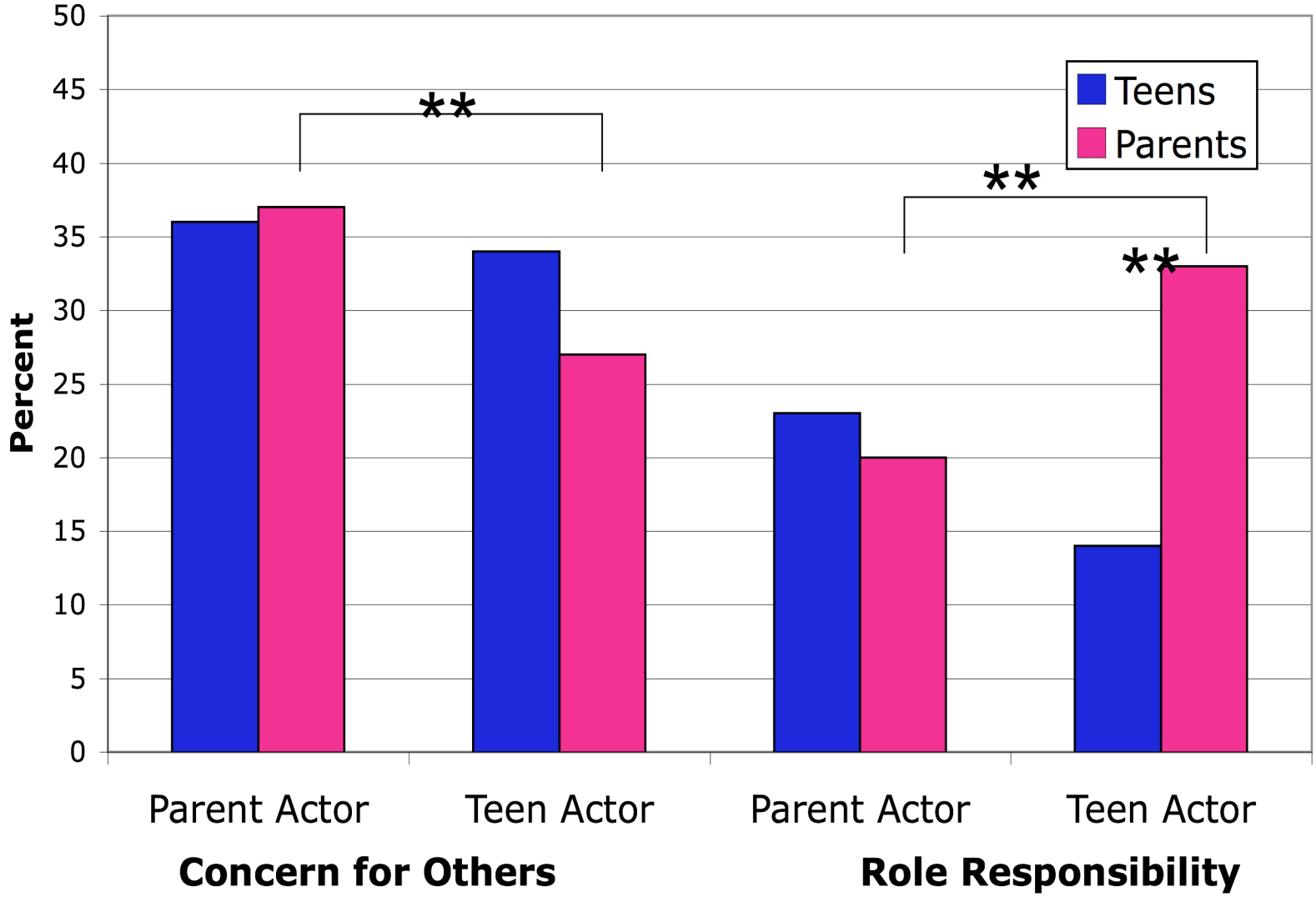


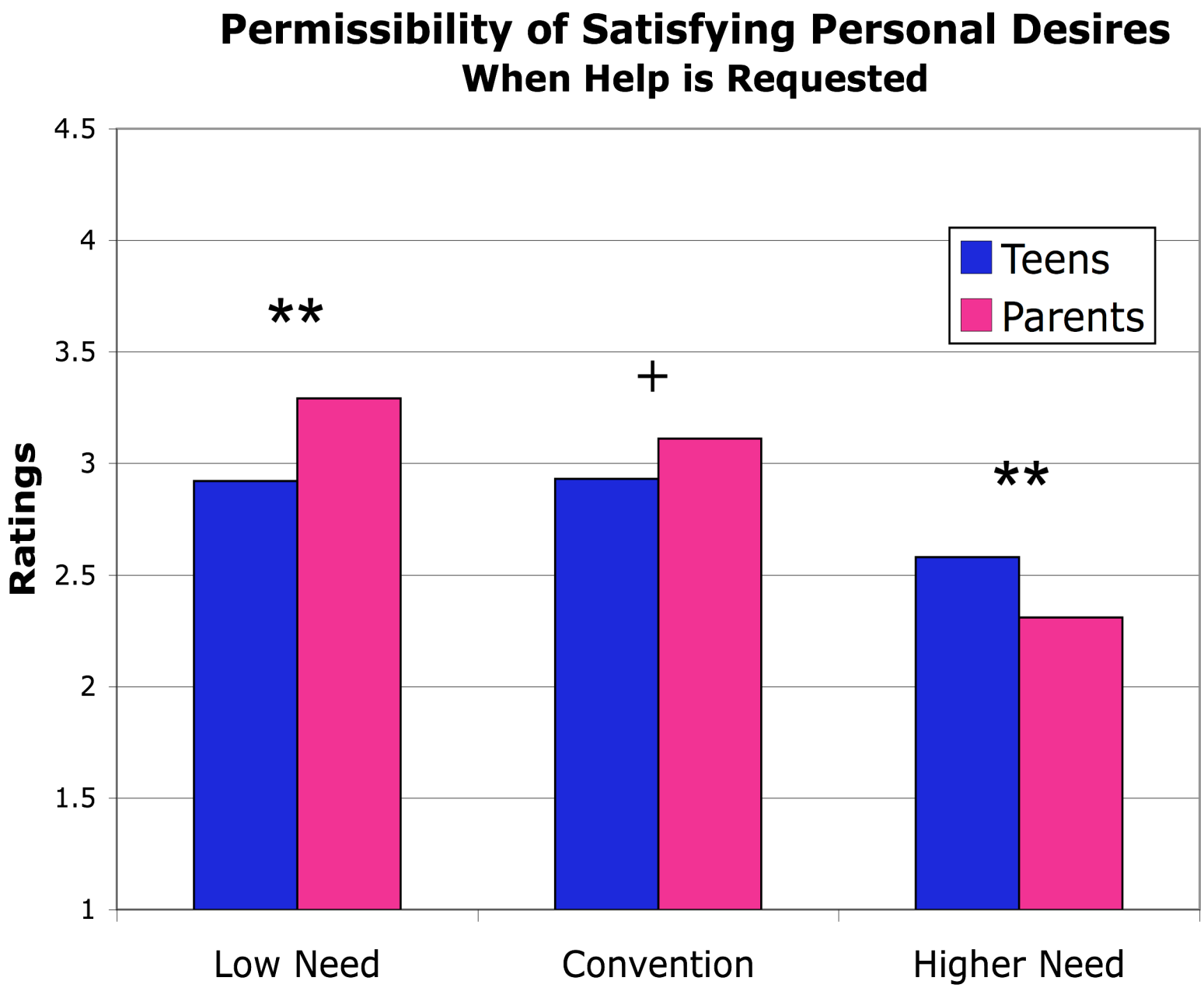
# Justifications

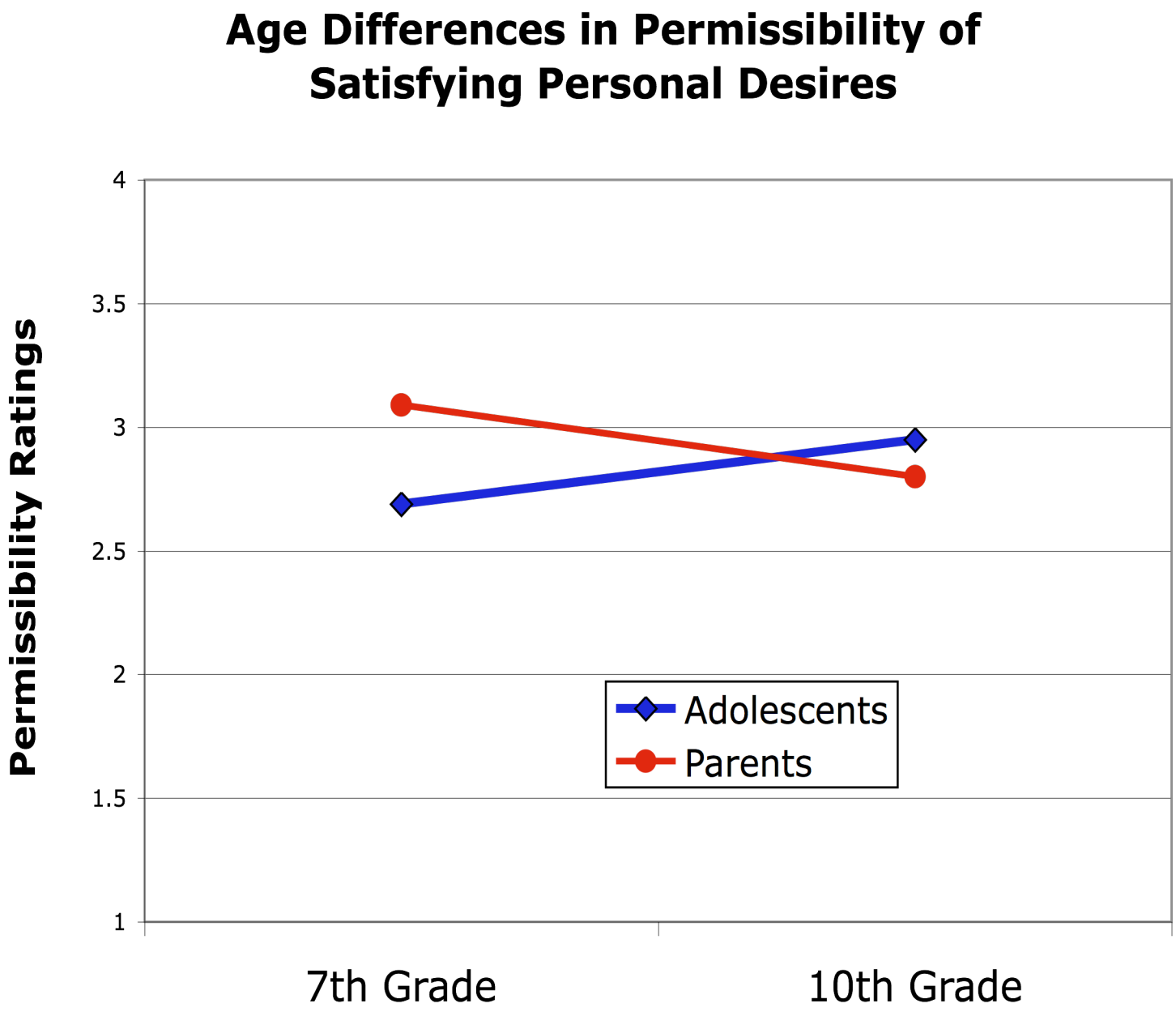
- Conventional
  - Tradition/Respect, Authority/Punishment Avoidance, Social Nonconformity
- Role Responsibility
  - Role & Relationship Responsibility, Social System Perspective
- Concern for Others
- Psychological
  - Relationship Maintenance, Psychological
- Moral
  - Instrumental Reciprocity, Fairness
- Personal
  - Benefits Actor/Personal Matter, Inconsequential
- Pragmatic/Prudential


Justifications For Helping
Percent
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
**
Teens
Parents
Conventional
Role Responsibility
Psychological
Concern for Others
Pragmatic
Personal

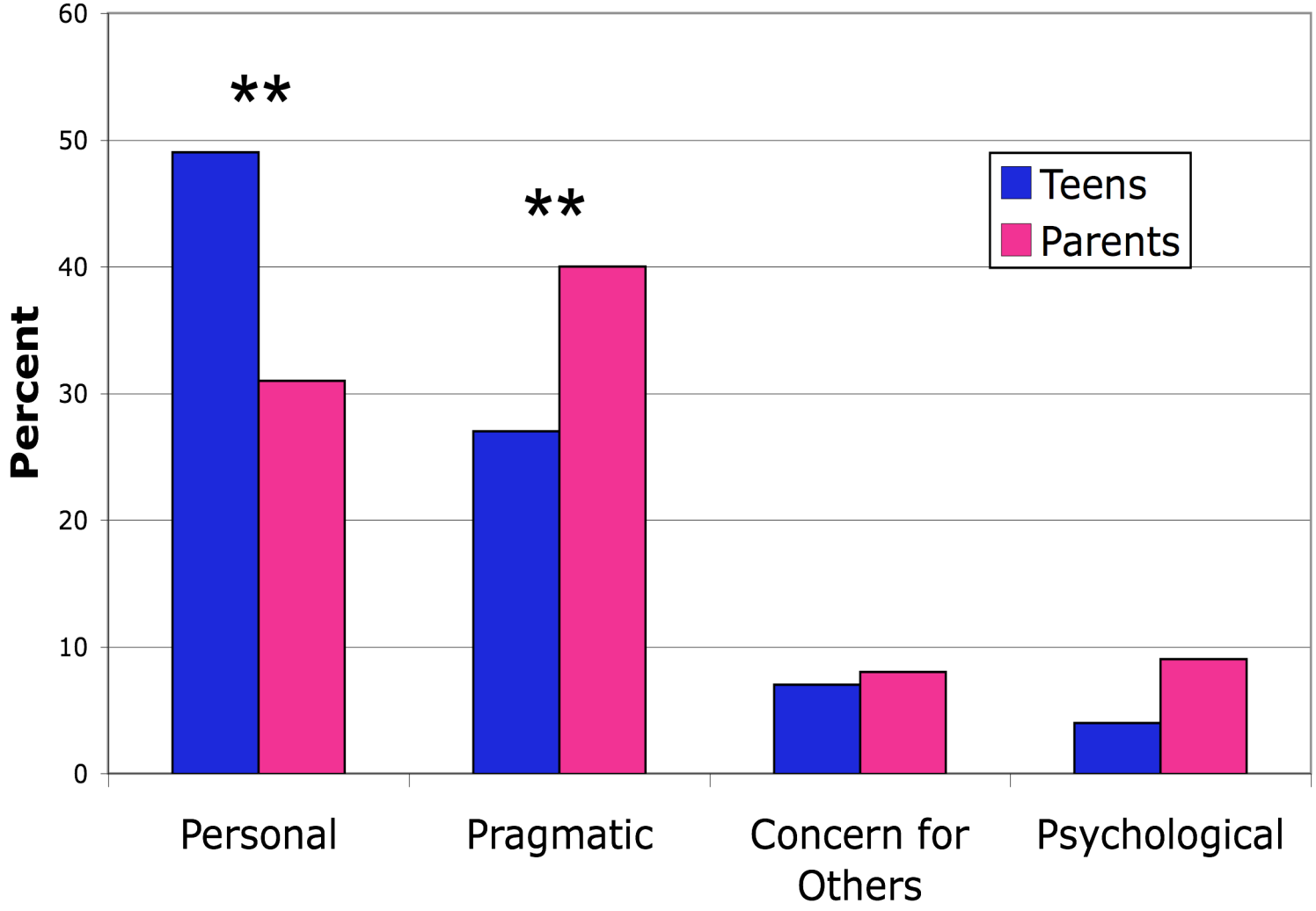
# Justifications For Story Actors

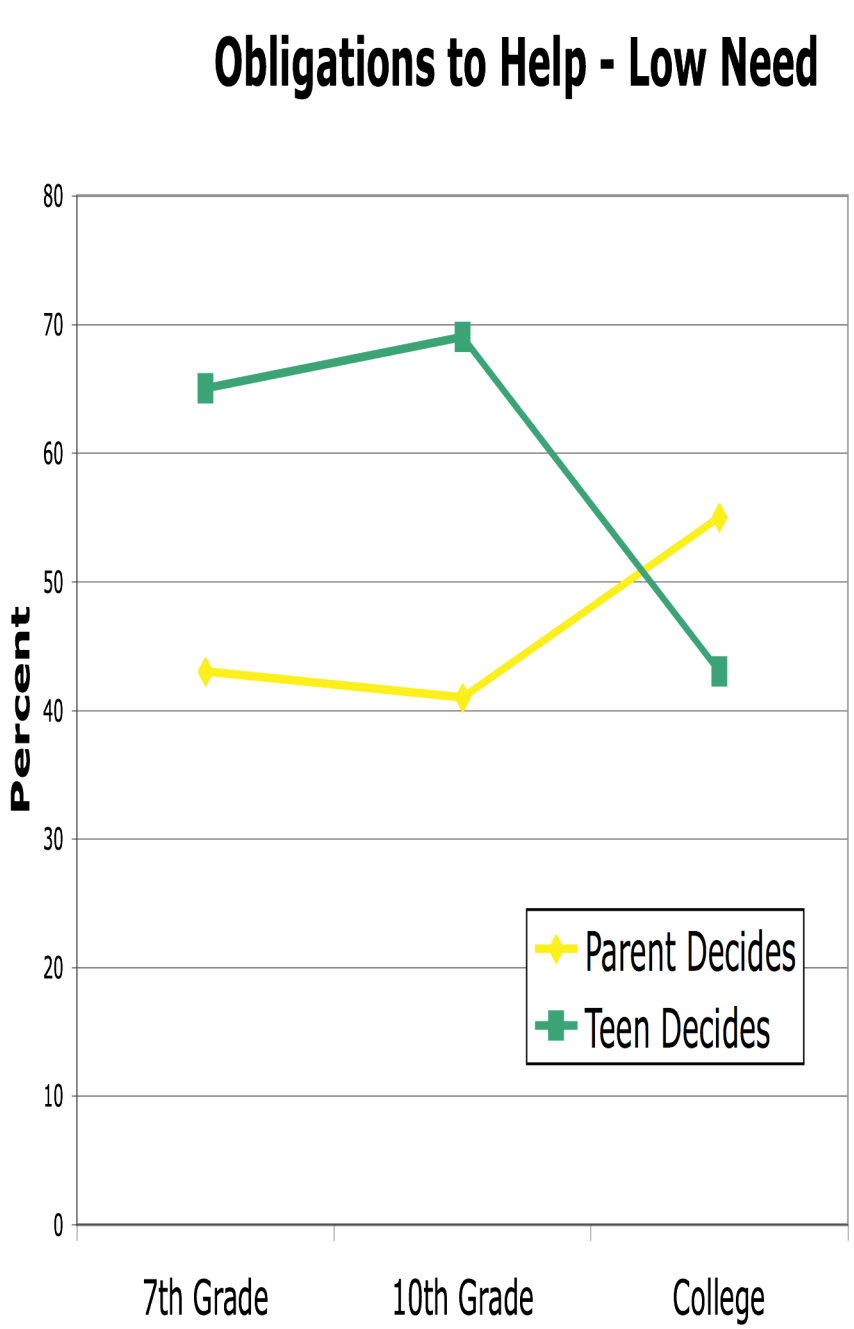


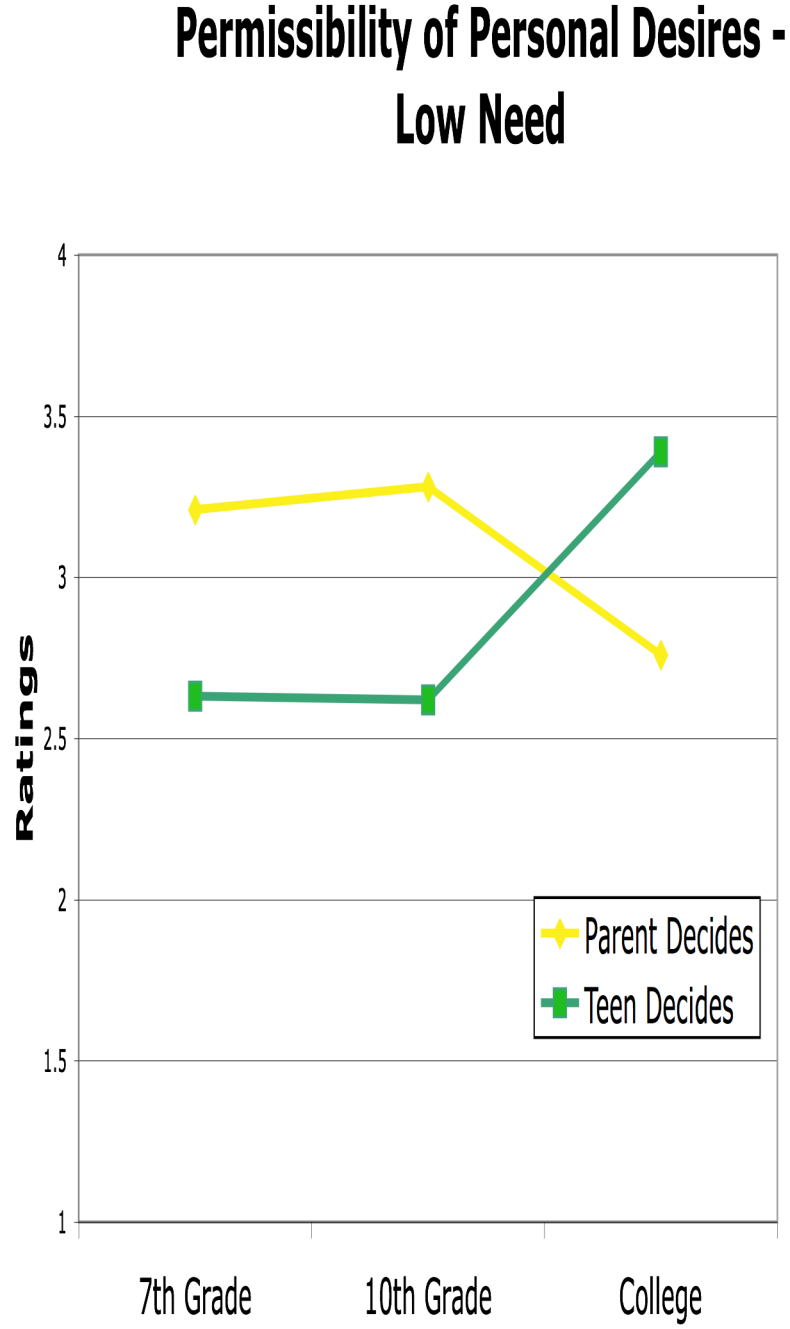

Permissibility of Satisfying Personal Desires
When Help is Requested
Ratings
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
Teens
Parents
**
+
**
Low Need
Convention
Higher Need

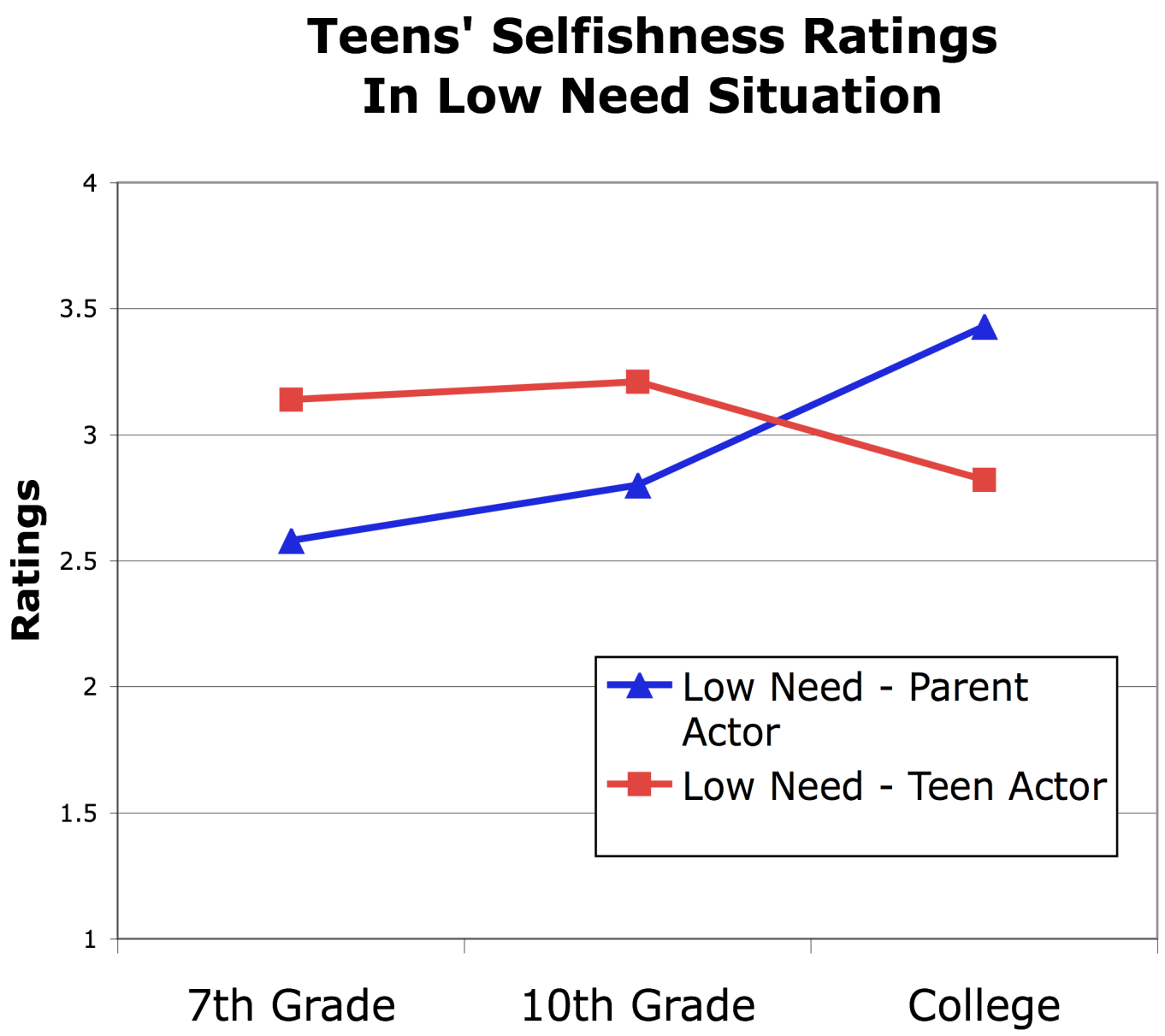

Age Differences in Permissibility of Satisfying Personal Desires
Permissibility Ratings
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
Adolescents
Parents
7th Grade
10th Grade

# Justifications for Not Helping (Satisfying Personal Desires)




Obligations to Help - Low Need
Percent
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
7th Grade
10th Grade
College
Parent Decides
Teen Decides


Permissibility of Personal Desires - Low Need
Ratings
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
7th Grade
10th Grade
College
Parent Decides
Teen Decides


Teens' Selfishness Ratings
In Low Need Situation
Ratings
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
7th Grade
10th Grade
College
Low Need - Parent Actor
Low Need - Teen Actor

# Family Measures

- Family Obligations/Interdependence
  - 5 items - Fuligni et al., 1999; 6 items from Phinney et al., 2005
- Behavioral Autonomy Expectations
  - 20 items adapted from Feldman & Quatman, 1988
  - When should a teen be able to decide issue for self? (1 = before 12 yrs of age, 5 = after age 20)
- Closeness to Parents
  - 18 items -Trust & Communication subscales of Parent-Peer Attachment Inventory (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)
- Conflict Intensity
  - 11 items (Smetana, 1989) - How “hot” did conflicts get?

# Correlations Between Permissibility of Personal Desires and Family Variables

| | Teens' Ratings | | Parents' Ratings | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| WHO DECIDES: | Teen | Parent | Teen | Parent |
| Family Income | -.09 | .10 | .02 | **.23*** |
| Mothers' Educ (yrs ) | -.04 | .01 | -.14 | .13 |
| Fathers' Educ (yrs ) | -.06 | .07 | -.01 | **.22*** |
| Family Obligation | **-.25**** | -.13 | .11 | .10 |
| A Autonony Expectations | **-.24*** | -.08 | **.19*** | .05 |
| P Closeness → A | .00 | **-.24*** | -.04 | **-.15+** |
| A Closeness → M | **-.16+** | -.14 | **-.16+** | .01 |
| A Closeness → F | .14 | **-.19*** | -.04 | -.06 |
| P Confl. Intensity → T | .07 | **.27*** | -.07 | .08 |

*Note.* + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

# Conclusions

- Teens (and parents) were neither selfish nor selfless
- Rather, evaluations of interpersonal family situations differed in complex ways (who was requesting help, type & level of need, adolescents' age)
- Most participants thought both adolescents and parents were obligated to help in higher need situations but less so in the other situations

- **Our higher need situations were everyday family situations (more like minor needs in other studies, e.g., Miller et al., 1990)

# Conclusions

- Age & parent/child differences in ratings suggest:
  - With age, increasing differentiation in terms of level of need
  - Low need - depends on role and age (parents increasingly obligated)
- Consistent with the notion that both autonomy and relatedness are basic human needs
- Thus, participants weighed, evaluated, and coordinated personal, moral, and conventional components
- Evaluations were associated with autonomy development, family relationships, and values (family obligation), but only in specific contexts

# Future Directions

- Need to examine evaluations in a broader range of situations & samples
  - Different levels of needs, different family members
  - Samples other than primarily White, middle class families
  - In real-life situations

# Thank you!

- We are grateful to the Fetzer Institute and the Institute for Unlimited Love ♥ for their support of this research

- Learn more about the Family & Social Processes Research Group of the University of Rochester at:
- http://www.psych.rochester.edu/research/socialdev/