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## What do mothers want to know about teens' activities? Levels, trajectories, and correlates

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### ABSTRACT

Middle class mothers ( $n = 169$ ) of middle adolescents ( $M = 15.69$  years old) in the U.S. rated how much they want to know and responded qualitatively about what they “always” and “never” want to know about adolescents' risky prudential (e.g., drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs), personal (e.g., teens' private conversations), and multifaceted (involving overlapping prudential and personal concerns) activities. Latent growth curve modeling over one year showed that mothers wanted to know most about prudential, less about multifaceted, and least about personal activities; wanting to know declined over time for each type of activity, but less for prudential than for other activities. With teen problem behavior controlled, psychologically controlling parenting, supportive and negative interactions with teens, knowledge of adolescents' activities, and teens' age were associated with individual differences in mothers' initial ratings and trajectories of wanting to know, although results varied by domain and were moderated by teen gender.

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We now know that greater parental knowledge – but not parental monitoring – is associated with adolescent deviance and norm breaking (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and indeed, leads to reductions over time in those negative outcomes (Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). These findings have led to much recent research on how parents obtain knowledge of adolescents' activities (Crouter, Bumpus, Davis, & McHale, 2005; Crouter, Helms-Erikson, Updegraff, & McHale, 1999; Keijsers et al., 2010; Keijsers & Laird, 2014). Studies have shown that parental knowledge, whether measured by parent or adolescent report, declines substantially across adolescence (Laird, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003; Masche, 2010; Smetana & Daddis, 2002), although more so for sons than for daughters (Laird et al., 2003; Masche, 2010).

This line of research has expanded recently far beyond the interest in links between parental knowledge and adolescent deviance. For instance, the finding that adolescent disclosure (not parental control or monitoring) is the primary source of parental knowledge has led to intense interest in the characteristics and correlates of adolescent disclosure, as well as the links between adolescent disclosure or concealment and parental monitoring (Keijsers & Laird, 2014). These studies suggest that parental knowledge declines largely because, as they grow older, teens typically choose to disclose less and conceal more from parents, partly as a way of gaining greater autonomy (Laird & Marrero, 2010; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Furthermore, research has expanded to consider a broad range of activities about which adolescents disclose or conceal (Smetana et al., 2006), and the current emphasis on adolescents'

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agency in the monitoring process also has led researchers to investigate teens' beliefs about what parents have a *right* to know (Brown, Bakken, Nguyen, & Von Bank, 2007) or *should* know (Laird et al., 2003). However, thus far, little research has considered what parents actually *want to know*, how this changes over time, and its correlates. These questions were the focus of the present study.

Much of the recent work on parental knowledge has used Kerr and Stattin's (2000) measure, which Steinberg and his colleagues (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994) originally developed as a 9-item scale to assess parental strictness and supervision. This widely used measure was subsequently critiqued as actually assessing parental knowledge (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and was reduced and slightly modified for the latter purpose. Kerr and Stattin's 5-item measure assesses how much parents know about how and with whom youth spend their time in and after school. Although this measure is reliable and face valid, we do not know if these are the activities about which parents most want to know. Crouter et al. (1999) conducted phone interviews assessing parents' knowledge about a more extensive set of daily activities, but knowledge was coded in term of matches between parents and teens and did not yield information about parents' desires to know about those activities. Thus, the first aim of the present study was to assess mothers' desires to know about different types of activities. We focused here on mothers, as past research has shown that mothers know more about teens' activities, particularly with peers (Updegraff, McHale, Crouter, & Kupanoff, 2001), and are more involved in teens' lives than are fathers (Crouter et al., 2005; Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004), and on middle adolescence, because this is when teens (at least in the U.S.) typically start driving and dating and their risk-taking increases (Smetana, 2011).

Research distinguishing domains of social knowledge, as defined within social domain theory (Smetana, 2006, 2011) has provided a useful conceptual framework for examining the balance among risks to the teen, parents' legitimate authority, and adolescents' developing autonomy. Across adolescence, parents and teens both view parents as legitimately regulating teens' involvement in risky prudential activities (like alcohol and illegal drug use) and arbitrary conventional activities (like using appropriate manners). Both parents and their offspring also agree – at least to some extent – that adolescents should have jurisdiction over personal issues involving privacy, control over the body, and personal choices like leisure activities and choice of friends (Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

However, parents and teens typically disagree about where to draw boundaries between parents' legitimate authority and adolescents' jurisdiction, especially when there are multiple, overlapping concerns (that is, when issues are multifaceted). Parents generally view such issues as hanging out with undesirable friends, sexual intimacy, and watching violent or sexually explicit movies as conventional or prudential and therefore under their control, whereas teens often view such issues as personal (Cumsille, Darling, Flaherty, & Martinez, 2006; Daddis & Randolph, 2010; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana et al., 2006). However, with age, multifaceted (and even prudential) issues are increasingly seen as personal, although less so by parents than by teens and at later ages for prudential than multifaceted issues (Daddis & Smetana, 2005). Parents may want to know most about issues they believe are under their control (and that protect teens from harm), with desires to know declining as control shifts to teens. However, parents may still want to know about activities they view as personal for the teen; indeed, past research has shown that while neither parents nor teens view disclosure about personal activities as obligatory, disclosing enhances closeness (Smetana et al., 2006). Thus, knowing may satisfy relational as well as protection needs.

Building on prior research, we examined how much mothers want to know about prudential, personal, and multifaceted activities. Mirroring distinctions found in beliefs about parental authority legitimacy (Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana et al., 2006), we hypothesized that mothers would want to know most about teens' prudential behavior, less about multifaceted (including romantic) activities, and least about personal issues. Past research has shown that during the teen years, parents exert greater control over girls' than boys' behavior, particularly around curfews and dating (Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1996). Thus, we expected that mothers would want to know more about girls' than boys' multifaceted behaviors. In addition, because our study addressed a novel issue, we augmented the quantitative ratings of specific items, which were drawn from social domain theory categories, with a more descriptive approach. That is, we also obtained mothers' qualitative responses regarding what they “always” and “never” want to know, thus allowing us better triangulate on the topics of concern or interest to mothers as well as the areas that they considered ‘off limits’.

We examined over-time changes in mothers' desires to know about middle adolescents' activities. Past research on parental knowledge and legitimate parental authority in middle adolescence (Masche, 2010; Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005) led us to expect that desires to know would decline normatively over one year, but more so for multifaceted and personal than prudential activities, because risky behavior typically increases in middle adolescence (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). We also expected that mothers of older adolescents would want to know more initially about prudential activities, as older youth are more likely to be out of the house and engaging in risky behavior, but then decline more quickly over time in desired knowledge, as teens gain autonomy over these issues in late adolescence. Associations with teen age were not expected for personal and multifaceted activities.

Process models have implicated the psychological resources of the parent as well as child characteristics as important in parenting (Belsky, 1984). Drawing on this model, as well as past research on the antecedents of parental knowledge (Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001) and beliefs about parental authority legitimacy (Cumsille et al., 2006), we hypothesized that parenting (psychological control, knowledge), parent–adolescent relationships (support, negative interactions), child characteristics (age, gender, self and peer problem behavior) and parent characteristics (maternal wellbeing) all may be associated with how much mothers want to know about teens' activities, as well as changes over time in those desires, potentially in domain-specific ways. That is, we expected that mothers who employ more effective parenting, have better

parent–child relationships and more resources available for parenting may demonstrate more domain- and developmentally appropriate knowledge desires (Smetana, 2011).

Psychological control, with its focus on manipulating the boundaries of the parent–child relationship and undermining the self (Barber, 1996), has been associated with more negative parent–child relationships (Pettit et al., 2001). Furthermore, adolescents view parents as more psychologically controlling and intrusive when they control personal issues (Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009; Smetana & Daddis, 2002). This suggests that greater psychological control and more negative parent–adolescent relationships may be associated with greater maternal desires to know, particularly about teens' personal activities, and that desires to know would decline more slowly over time among more, as compared to less, psychologically controlling mothers. Based on research showing that adolescents' more negative behavior at home predicts less parental monitoring (Kerr, Stattin, & Pakalniskiene, 2008), we also predicted that mothers reporting more negative interactions would decline more rapidly over time in desired knowledge of multifaceted activities compared to mothers lower in these ratings.

In addition, although the findings have been somewhat conflicting, research on parental solicitation suggests that parents may want to know more about adolescents' prudential and multifaceted activities because they believe that their adolescents are more involved in problem behavior (Kerr & Stattin, 2003). However, despite worrying more and trusting teens less, these parents appear to engage in less monitoring behaviors, in part due to feeling intimidated or cut off from teens (Kerr et al., 2008). Consequently, we hypothesized that more (mother-rated) teen problem behavior would be associated with wanting to know more about prudential and multifaceted activities at Wave 1 but faster declines in desired knowledge over time. Given parents' potential concerns about negative peer influences (Mounts, 2000), we also examined peer involvement in problem behavior and hypothesized that mothers may want to know more about these activities when they perceive their teen's friends as more deviant.

Finally, mothers who are higher in psychological wellbeing may be better able to cope with – and have more emotional resources available for – the challenges of parenting an adolescent (Belsky, 1984; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Thus, we hypothesized that greater maternal wellbeing would be associated with wanting to know more about prudential and multifaceted issues. Whether similar associations would be found for personal issues is unclear, as mothers higher in wellbeing potentially may be better able to help their teen negotiate autonomy development and thus may want to know more but be willing to know less. Finally, although mothers have closer, more supportive, and more conflictive relationships with their daughters than their sons (Collins & Steinberg, 2006), we do not know if associations between mothers' desires to know and parenting and relationship quality vary by gender. Therefore, we examined whether gender moderated associations but did not test specific hypotheses.

## Method

### Sample

Participants were 169 mothers ( $M = 46.37$  years,  $SD = 5.77$ ) of adolescents in the 10th and 11th grades ( $M = 15.69$  years of age,  $SD = .63$ , 78 males). Families were recruited from two suburban high schools in a Northeastern city in the U.S. and studied three times over one year. Mothers were primarily (83%) European American; the remainder were Asian (8%), African American (5%), or other (3%); 2% identified as Latino. Most families included two biological parents (68%); 24% were single parent, mostly divorced (18%), and the rest were stepparent families. Nearly all mothers (95%) lived with their youth all or part of the time. Most mothers (85%) had at least some college education, and most worked full-time (57%) or part-time (24%).

Mothers were assessed at six months and then one year after Wave 1, with an overall attrition rate of 2%. Asian mothers were more likely to drop out than were other mothers, but there were no other demographic differences between retained and attrited mothers.

### Procedures

Families were recruited through letters sent home to parents of 10th–11th graders from two high schools and through information made available to students in school. Interested parents filled out an interest form on a secure online site or contacted the project office by phone. Families were enrolled in the study once all permission and consent forms were returned.

Due to limitations in the funding available for honoraria, participation in the study was capped at the first 215 families to return completed forms. This led to a participation rate of approximately 15% of all eligible families in the two districts but 58% of the families who indicated interest and were mailed consent forms. The demographic background of participating students matched the profiles of the two high schools, although the average GPA was higher. Families received honoraria for their participation (\$35, \$50, and \$60 for completing the first, second, and third set of surveys, respectively).

The surveys were administered online using SurveyMonkey (97%) or through completion of paper versions if families preferred. Participating family members were sent separate e-mail links and weekly reminders until the surveys were completed or participation was discontinued.

## Measures

### Want to know ratings

At all three waves, mothers rated how much they *wanted to know* about each of 17 items (described in Table 1) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 5 (*definitely yes*).

### Actual knowledge

At Wave 1, mothers rated how much they *really know* about the same items, assessing ‘want to know’ on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*don't know at all*) to 5 (*know all or mostly all*). Three scales parallel to the want-to-know scales were created, and mean scores for each category were obtained. Scale alphas for independent variables are in Table 2.

### Psychological control

At Wave 1, mothers rated their psychologically controlling parenting on Barber, Stolz, and Olson's (2005) 8-item measure. Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 4 (*very much like me*) and averaged.

### Positive support

At Wave 1, mothers rated their positive support on 8 items from Barber, Stolz, and Olsen (2005). Items were rated on the same 4-point scale as for psychological control; mean ratings were obtained.

### Negative interactions

Mothers rated their negative interactions with their teens on the conflict and antagonism subscales (3 items each) of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*little or none*) to 5 (*extremely much*) and then averaged.

### Maternal well-being

At Wave 1, mothers rated their wellbeing on Ryff's (1989) 18-item measure. Responses were rated on a 6-item scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and then averaged.

### Teens' and friends' problem behavior

At Wave 1, mothers separately rated their adolescent's and friends' problem behavior using a shortened version of the Problem Behavior Scale (PBS; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996). Mothers rated the frequency that each target engaged in 10 acts of minor deviance (e.g., drug and alcohol use, vandalism, minor theft, truancy) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never happens*) to 5 (*happens very often*). Separate means for teens' and friends' problem behavior were obtained.

### Qualitative descriptions

After completing Wave 1 want-to-know ratings, mothers were asked if there were other things that they *always* want to know and *absolutely do not* want to know. Separate coding systems for “always” and “never” responses, described in Table 3, were developed on 20% of responses and coded reliably on another 20% of responses ( $\kappa = .90, .89$ , respectively). Mothers

**Table 1**  
Want-to-know domain-differentiated latent variables, corresponding items, and model fit.

Domains/items						
Prudential	Multifaceted	Personal				
Driving recklessly	Spending unsupervised time at a friend's house	How allowance money or earnings are spent				
Drinking alcohol with friends	Hanging out with friends parents don't know or like	What teen talks about on the phone with friends				
Going to parties where teens are drinking	Watching sexually explicit or violent movies, videos, DVDs	Who teen likes/has a crush on				
Smoking marijuana or using other illegal drugs	Whether teen spends time alone with boy/girlfriend	What teen chats about or posts on MySpace or Facebook				
Staying out past curfew <sup>a</sup>	Who or whether teen is dating	The websites teen visits				
	How intimate the teen is, with a boyfriend or girlfriend					
	How teen spends free time <sup>b</sup>					
3- Factor model fit statistics		$\chi^2$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	Factor loadings
Wave 1:		229.73**	.92	.08	.06	All $ps < .001$
Wave 2:		257.50**	.90	.09	.06	All $ps < .001$
Wave 3:		224.17**	.91	.08	.08	All $ps < .001$

Note.  $df = 108$ .

<sup>a</sup> Initially a multifaceted item but included in the prudential factor to improve model fit.

<sup>b</sup> Initially a personal item but added to the multifaceted factor to improve model fit.

**Table 2**  
Alphas, means (SDs) and intercorrelations among study variables.

	$\alpha$	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Teen age	–	15.69	.63	1.00	–.11	.01	–.08	.15+	.02	.17*	–.09	–.11	–.10
2. Mom well-being	.82	4.63	.60		1.00	–.41**	.29**	–.25**	–.17*	–.14	.26**	.24**	.15*
3. Psych control	.79	1.48	.44			1.00	–.12	.51**	.27**	–.14+	–.11	.07	
4. Positive support	.81	3.77	.55				1.00	–.20*	–.12	–.16*	.40**	.37**	.32**
5. Neg interactions	.93	1.67	.67					1.00	.27**	.21**	–.11	–.04	.03
6. Problem behavior	.71	1.48	.44						1.00	.46**	–.21**	–.24**	–.03
7. Friend prob behav	.93	1.78	1.77							1.00	–.10	–.09	.04
8. Knowledge – prud	.86	4.18	1.02								1.00	.76**	.54**
9. Knowledge – multi	.89	3.74	.92									1.00	.67**
10. Knowledge – pers	.80	3.04	.84										1.00
W1 WTK – prudential	.91	4.72	.51	.04	.19*	–.24**	.27**	.01	–.06	–.10	.26**	.19*	.11
W1 WTK – mixed	.84	4.07	.65	–.11	.19*	–.04	.18*	.12	–.06	–.16*	.38**	.29**	.19*
W1 WTK – personal	.84	3.38	.77	–.10	.10	.10	.23**	.15*	.05	–.06	.34**	.23**	.28**
W2 WTK – prudential	.89	4.61	.60	–.12	.21*	–.21**	.20**	.21**	–.09	–.09	.23**	.17*	.07
W2 WTK – mixed	.85	3.94	.65	–.18*	.15*	–.03	.14	–.15	–.08	.07.	.27**	.21**	.16*
W2 WTK – Personal	.84	3.18	.77	–.22*	.10	.09	.16*	–.02	–.02	.05	.21**	.17*	.28**
W3 WTK – prudential	.85	4.59	.57	–.16*	.14+	–.04	.21**	–.12	–.13+	–.05	.17+	.07	.06
W3 WTK – mixed	.84	3.73	.73	–.16*	.04	.08	.18*	.01	–.10	–.03	.18+	.17*	.12
W3WTK – personal	.85	3.00	.85	–.13+	.01	.10	.18*	–.01	–.04	.01	.13	.13+	.21**

Note: Psych = Psychological, Neg = Negative, Prob Behav = Problem Behavior, Prud = Prudential, Multi = Multifaceted, Pers = Personal. WTK = Want to know. Well-being was rated on a 6-point scale, psychological control was rated on a 4-point scale and all other scales were rated on a 5-point scale. +  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

typically offered one or two responses with a maximum of three responses. Percentages of each type of response were obtained.

*Preliminary analyses*

To test whether the items cohered within the hypothesized domains, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus 7.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Non-significant chi-square values, CFIs greater than .90, and RMSEAs less than .08 indicate acceptable fit (Kline, 2005). Analyses testing the fit of one, two, and three-factor models indicated that at each wave, the three-factor model provided a better fit than the one-factor solution,  $\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df = 3) = 252.72, 253.15, 247.97, ps < .001$ , or the two-factor solution,  $\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df = 2) = 48.98, 46.05, 77.07, ps < .001$  (fit statistics are in Table 1). Strong factorial invariance was present across waves. Errors among items involving similar themes or behaviors within a factor (e.g., romantic behaviors in the multifaceted factor) were allowed to correlate. In the final model, errors were correlated for two personal items, three pairs of multifaceted items, and two pairs of prudential items.

**Table 3**  
Descriptive categories and frequencies (in %) of what parents “always” and “never” want to know (WTK).

<b>Always WTK</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Description and examples for “always” want to know</b>
Harmful, illegal, or dangerous acts	24%	Dangerous, risky, or illegal behaviors, including drugs, alcohol, cars and driving, whether teen is sexually active/engaging in risky sexual behavior
School & schoolwork	23%	How teen is doing in school, grades, tests, homework, what happens in class
Interpersonal relationships	15%	Relationships with friends, romantic partners, siblings, or teachers, including negative treatment, bullying, or violence
Monitoring	12%	Where teen is going, with whom, and when
Life choices/values	6%	Values, long-term or serious decisions where teen may need guidance
Teens' health/well-being	6%	Physical and mental health, compliance with medication, exercise, eating and sleeping habits, and moods and emotions
Leisure	4%	Choice of games, sports, or afterschool activities
Other	5%	Don't know, other, or uncodable
None/nothing	29%	Nothing else; doesn't want/need to know more because teen is sharing
<b>Never WTK</b>		<b>Description and examples for “never” want to know</b>
Everything	64%	There is nothing the parent does not want to know
Personal issues	10%	Trivial or mundane issues that don't require oversight; recognition of privacy
Friendships	8%	Friendships, including what teen talks about, texts, or does with friends
Up to teen to share	7%	Parent is happy to listen; doesn't want to know unless teen wants to share
Sexual/romantic behavior	6%	Necessary, important, or partial information about sexual behavior, romantic activity, or if the teen is sexually active or having safe sex
Parent-teen	5%	Details about the relationship or other parent; hurtful opinions of the parent
Other	2%	Don't know, other, or uncodable

## Results

### Latent growth models of mothers' ratings of desired knowledge

#### Unconditional model

We fit latent growth curve models (LGMs) to examine developmental changes and individual differences in mothers' desires to know about teens' activities. The baseline or unconditional model was specified in terms of what mothers wanted to know at the first wave (i.e., the intercept) and changes in ratings over time (i.e., the slope). We first tested for domain differences (prudential, multifaceted, personal) in the unconditional model using a multiple group analysis. As domains were nested within individuals, we used the "type = complex" function in *Mplus* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Fit indexes were computed using the MLR estimator, which is robust to non-normality and non-independence of observations in complex models (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). A chi-square difference test was computed using the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square adjustment (Satorra & Bentler, 2011). The fit of the model was significantly reduced when the latent intercepts and slopes and the variances of each were constrained to be equal across domains, scaled  $\Delta\chi^2 = 209.98$ ,  $\Delta df = 8$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficients and standard errors for domain-differentiated unconditional models are in Table 4. Pairwise differences between domains for each coefficient were then examined using the Model Constraint command in *Mplus*.

The latent intercepts all differed significantly ( $ps < .001$ ). Consistent with hypotheses, estimated means were highest for the latent prudential factor, less for the multifaceted factor, and least for the personal factor. Ratings for each declined significantly over time, but as expected, there was a significantly greater decline in the multifaceted and personal than the prudential latent variable. Multiple group analyses, run separately within domains to test for sex moderation, indicated that there were no significant sex differences in the latent intercepts or slopes.

#### Conditional models with predictors

Given the significant domain differences in the unconditional model, growth curve models with predictors were estimated separately by domain. Adolescents' age and mother-rated support, psychological control, negative interactions, teen and friend involvement in problem behaviors, and mothers' well-being were modeled as predictors of the intercepts and slopes in the prudential and personal models. In the multifaceted model, these same correlates were estimated only for the intercept, as variance in the slope was non-significant. Bivariate correlations among the variables are shown in Table 2.

#### Prudential model

The prudential model provided an adequate fit to the data,  $\chi^2(9) = 15.86$ ,  $p = .07$ , CFI = .97, RMSEA = 0.07 (.00–.13), see Fig. 1. Higher Wave 1 levels of support and negative interactions and lower Wave 1 levels of maternal psychological control were associated with mothers' initially wanting to know more about adolescents' prudential behavior. Furthermore, wanting to know declined more rapidly over time among mothers of older teens, mothers reporting more negative interactions, and marginally, mothers reporting more teen problem behavior. In contrast, wanting to know about these behaviors declined more slowly among mothers higher in psychological control and those reporting greater knowledge of these activities.

Next, a multiple group analysis was estimated to examine whether teen gender moderated the paths. Model fit was significantly worse when paths were constrained to be equal for boys and girls than when they were free to vary,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 30.93$ ,  $\Delta df = 15$ ,  $p < .01$ . As shown in Fig. 1, the link between Wave 1 maternal support and mothers' initial desire to know was stronger and significant only for boys, whereas the effects of psychological control on both the intercept and slope were stronger and significant only for girls.

#### Multifaceted model

The multifaceted model provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(18) = 15.73$ ,  $p = .61$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 (.00–.02). Mothers initially wanted to know more about teens' multifaceted activities when they had more Wave 1 knowledge of these same behaviors and marginally ( $p < .07$ ), when teens were younger.

However, teen gender significantly moderated these results,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 17.87$ ,  $\Delta df = 6$ ,  $p < .01$ . As shown in Fig. 2, mothers' greater Wave 1 knowledge was associated with significantly more initial desire to know about boys' than girls' activities. Likewise, positive associations between friends' problem behavior and maternal want-to-know, which were not significant in

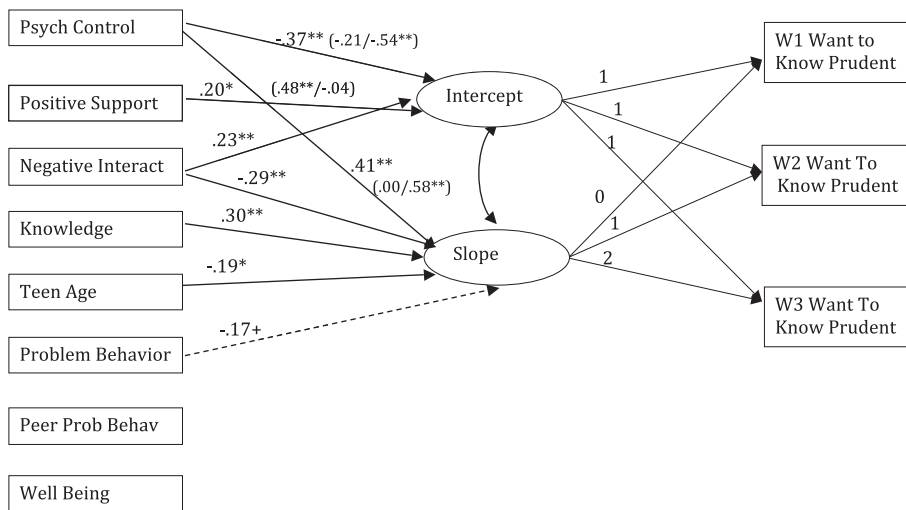
**Table 4**

Parameter estimates and standard errors for unconditional latent growth models.

	Prudential		Multifaceted		Personal	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Mean intercept	4.71** <sub>a</sub>	.04	4.09** <sub>b</sub>	.05	3.38** <sub>c</sub>	.06
Mean slope	-.06** <sub>a</sub>	.03	-.17** <sub>b</sub>	.03	-.19** <sub>b</sub>	.04
Intercept variance	.21** <sub>a</sub>	.08	.28** <sub>a</sub>	.08	.49** <sub>b</sub>	.08
Slope variance	.07** <sub>ab</sub>	.04	.04 <sub>a</sub>	.03	.12** <sub>b</sub>	.04

Note.  $\chi^2(df = 3) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .34$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .014. Subscripts within rows indicate significant differences.

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

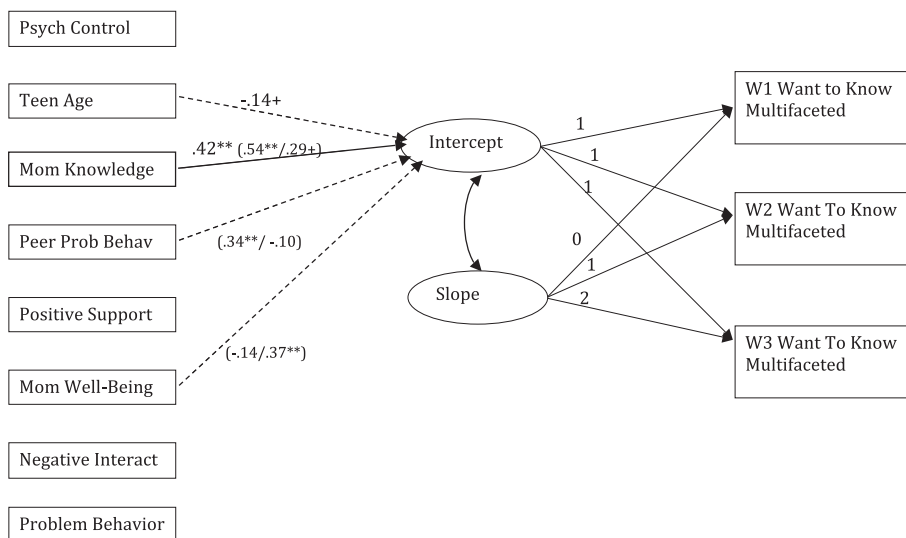


**Fig. 1.** Latent growth model with covariates for mothers' WTK about prudent activities. Note.  $\chi^2$  (9) = 15.86,  $p$  = .07, CFI = .97, RMSEA = 0.07 (.00–.13). Prud = Prudential, Psych = Psychological, Prob Behav = Problem Behavior, Interact = Interaction. Only significant and marginally significant paths are depicted, but all paths were modeled. Coefficients for moderated paths are in parentheses (boys/girls). Within-wave correlations were modeled but are omitted here for clarity. + $p$  < .10, \* $p$  < .05, \*\* $p$  < .01.

the overall model, were significant and significantly stronger for boys. In contrast, maternal wellbeing predicted mothers' greater desire to know only about girls' multifaceted activities, with the path significantly differing between genders (see Fig. 2).

*Personal model*

The personal model fit adequately,  $\chi^2$  (9) = 11.69,  $p$  = .23, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .044 (.00–.11). As with multifaceted activities, greater maternal knowledge was associated with higher initial levels of mothers' wanting to know about teens' personal activities,  $\beta$  = .48,  $p$  < .01, as were more negative interactions, but only marginally,  $\beta$  = .23,  $p$  < .06. Further, desires to know declined more rapidly over time among mothers reporting more negative interactions,  $\beta$  = -.34,  $p$  < .05, and marginally among mothers higher in wellbeing,  $\beta$  = -.34,  $p$  < .06.



**Fig. 2.** Latent growth model with covariates for mothers' WTK about multifaceted activities. Note. Model fit was  $\chi^2$  (18) = 15.73,  $p$  = .61, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 (.00–.02). Psych = Psychological, Prob Behav = Problem Behavior, Interact = Interaction. Only significant and marginally significant paths are depicted, but all paths were modeled. Coefficients for paths moderated by gender are in parentheses (boys/girls). Within-wave correlations were modeled but are omitted here for clarity. + $p$  < .10, \* $p$  < .05, \*\* $p$  < .01.

Multiple group analysis indicated significant gender moderation,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 35.50$ ,  $\Delta df = 16$ ,  $p < .01$ . Mothers wanted to know more initially about girls' than boys' personal activities when they were higher in problem behavior ( $\beta$ 's =  $-.21$ ,  $-.02$ ,  $p < .10$ , ns).

#### *Qualitative responses regarding what mothers want to know*

##### *What do mothers always want to know?*

The most frequent response (shown in Table 3) was that mothers had no additional concerns beyond the issues assessed in the survey, but they also reported always wanting to know about dangerous, illegal, or risky activities in general, academic performance and schoolwork, and interpersonal relationships. Other categories were endorsed less frequently. *T*-tests examining whether responses differed according to teens' sex did not yield significant differences.

##### *What do mothers never want to know?*

Most responses indicated that there was nothing mothers did not want to know, although a very small proportion of responses stated that they were happy to listen but that they did not need or want to know unless the teen wanted to share. Other issues were raised less than 10% of the time (see Table 3). *T*-tests indicated that mothers were marginally more likely never to want to know about boys' than girls' sexual or romantic lives,  $M_s = .11$ ,  $.02$ ,  $p < .07$ .

## **Discussion**

Despite the intense interest over the past decade in parents' knowledge of adolescents' activities and in adolescent disclosure as a source of parental knowledge, little is known about what parents actually *want* to know about their teens' activities and the trajectories and correlates of these knowledge desires over time. This was the focus of the present study. We found that U.S. middle class mothers wanted to know more about risky than other activities, that desires to know about teens' activities declined normatively during high school, although at different rates for different types of activities, and that parenting, parent–teen relationship quality, and maternal and teen characteristics all were associated with mothers' knowledge desires, although also differentially by domain.

#### *What do mothers want to know?*

Consistent with hypotheses derived from social domain theory (Smetana, 2006, 2011), results indicated that desires to know about risky prudential behaviors, multifaceted activities (including interactions with peers and romantic partners), and personal choices were distinct in mothers' ratings of their desires to know. Moreover, the domain composition of the factors was similar to past research on related constructs such as parental authority legitimacy. Somewhat surprisingly, though, 'how teens spend free time' loaded on the multifaceted factor, whereas this item has been treated as prototypically personal in other research. In thinking about what they want to know, mothers may have focused on the risks to teens when they are unsupervised.

At Wave 1, mothers' desires to know were at near ceiling levels for prudential activities, significantly lower for multifaceted activities, and lowest (although still quite high) for personal activities. These findings are not surprising, given that parents want to keep their teens safe during a developmental period when risky behavior is on the rise, time spent at home decreases (Collins & Steinberg, 2006), and teens disclose little about their risky behavior to parents (Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009; Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009). Furthermore, qualitative responses indicated that for the most part, our items captured the relevant behaviors that mothers always want to know. Most frequently, responses indicated that mothers always want to know about teens' dangerous, illegal, or risky behaviors, but they also always wanted to know about schoolwork, academic progress, and grades on tests. These latter items were not included in our ratings but clearly should be assessed in future research.

Mothers primarily responded that there was nothing about teens' activities they did not want to know, although some acknowledged that there were things they did not need to know but that they would listen if their teens wanted to disclose. This may be how parental autonomy provision is expressed regarding parental knowledge desires, as wanting to know can indicate either a desire to control adolescents' behavior or closeness and interest, with the latter mainly taking this form. A similar but small percentage of responses indicated that mothers both *always* and *never* wanted to know about adolescents' interpersonal (including romantic) relationships, particularly (for *never* responses) if teens, and especially boys, were having sex. This is consistent with past research indicating that although nearly all mothers believe they ought to communicate with their teens about sexuality, they vary in how comfortable they are in discussing this (Rosenthal, Feldman, & Edwards, 1998).

#### *Trajectories and correlates in mothers' desires to know*

Mothers' desires to know about each type of activity declined over time, although more so for multifaceted and personal than prudential activities. It is worth noting that although the high initial ratings of prudential activities left little room for *increases* over time in these ratings, this did not preclude finding *no change* rather than a significant decline over time, as was found here. Furthermore, we also observed significant variability in this trajectory. Past research has shown that mothers



grant autonomy over personal and multifaceted issues at earlier ages than for prudential issues, which are not typically seen as under adolescent control until late adolescence or emerging adulthood (Daddis & Smetana, 2005). Both the slower decline over time for prudential than other activities and the more rapid decreases in desired knowledge of prudential activities observed among mothers of older than younger middle adolescents suggest that the balance tips towards greater teen autonomy as the end of high school approaches, at least in our sample of middle-income, largely European American mothers. This may differ among mothers raising teenagers in poverty or in high-risk environments, where greater maternal control may be necessary to keep teens safe (Aber, Brooks-Gunn, Gebhardt, & Connell, 1997).

Inter-individual differences in desired knowledge were largely domain-specific, except for the effects of maternal knowledge. Even for maternal knowledge, however, findings varied as to whether wanting-to-know was associated with initial levels or trajectories of change. Mothers who reported knowing more about prudential activities declined more slowly over time in desires to know about these issues. This slower decline suggests that mothers who claimed to know more remained more concerned over time about teens' involvement in problem behavior. In fact, bivariate correlations showed that greater knowledge was associated with lower levels of teen problem behavior, and the pattern of correlations for other variables suggested that more knowledgeable mothers were more authoritative in their parenting (e.g., higher in support and lower in negative interactions and psychological control). Thus, it appears that more authoritative mothers, whose teens appear to be less involved in problem behavior, are the ones who remain concerned, involved, and wanting to know about these behaviors, whereas the mothers who have reason to be concerned do not.

In contrast to the reduced decline in wanting to know about prudential activities, greater maternal knowledge of multifaceted and personal activities was robustly associated with wanting to know more about these activities at Wave 1, but not with changes in desired knowledge over time. These findings are not likely to be due to a third variable (for instance, closeness), as relationships and parenting were controlled in our analyses. In addition, for multifaceted activities, the link between desired and actual knowledge was stronger for boys than for girls. Parents tend to know less about boys' than girls' activities (Laird et al., 2003; Masche, 2010), which may mean that mothers who do know more about their son's behaviors are particularly invested in remaining informed. It is also possible that mothers believe they need to know less about girls' multifaceted activities, both because parents restrict such behaviors (particularly around dating and romantic partners) more for girls than boys (Bulcroft et al., 1996) and because girls disclose more about these topics to mothers than do boys (Daddis & Randolph, 2010; Smetana et al., 2009).

Other results mostly pertained to mothers' desires to know about prudential activities. Contrary to our hypotheses, significant findings for positive support were obtained only for prudential activities and then only for mothers of boys. Past research consistently has shown that teens who view their parents as more supportive and accepting disclose more to them about different types of activities, including risky prudential behavior (Yau et al., 2009). As boys typically engage in more problem behavior than girls (Farrington, 2009), maternal support may be particularly important for eliciting boys' disclosure of their risky behavior and in responding to disclosure in a way that keeps lines of communication open (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010).

We had initially hypothesized that greater psychological control would be associated with wanting to know more about adolescents' personal activities, but instead, associations were found only for prudential activities, only among girls, and in the opposite direction than expected. Mothers who were higher in psychological control wanted to know less at Wave 1 about girls' prudential behavior but then declined less rapidly over time in their desired knowledge, with highly psychologically controlling mothers actually increasing in their desired knowledge. Thus, these findings suggest that psychological control was associated with a lack of developmentally appropriate autonomy provision. As higher levels of psychological control are strongly associated with more norm breaking and deviance (Barber et al., 2005), our results suggest that psychologically controlling mothers may attempt to find out about, and perhaps control, risky behaviors too late, and potentially in reaction to problem behavior rather than as a preventative measure. Indeed, as research has shown that parental psychological control is associated with maladaptive perfectionism (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Duriez, & Goossens, 2006), it is possible that mothers who are higher in psychological control are delayed in their prudential monitoring because they initially do not want to acknowledge or address their child's risky misbehavior, as this might be seen as reflecting badly on the adequacy of their parenting.

Mothers reporting more negative interactions had higher initial levels of wanting to know about prudential and personal issues and then more rapid declines in wanting to know over time. Adolescents are likely to disclose less and conceal more about these issues when their interactions with mothers are negative (due to fear parental disapproval for prudential activities and beliefs that issues are private and not their parents' business for personal behaviors (Smetana et al., 2009; Yau et al., 2009)); therefore mothers' greater initial desired knowledge may be in reaction to perceived adolescent reticence. Alternatively, mothers who desire a lot of knowledge may evoke push-back from adolescents, leading to more negative interactions; negative interactions which then lead mothers to ultimately withdraw over time, as has been found with parental monitoring (Kerr et al., 2008).

Except for maternal knowledge, there was little overlap between the correlates of knowledge desires for prudential and multifaceted activities. Whereas mothers' Wave 1 wanting to know about prudential activities was marginally associated with target teens' problem behavior, greater wanting to know about multifaceted activities at Wave 1 was significantly and positively associated mothers' perceptions of greater peer problem behavior, particularly for mothers of boys. Because the multifaceted items largely focused on adolescents' interactions with friends and romantic activities, boys may be more willing to reveal their friends' than their own romantic behavior, especially as boys are less likely than girls to reveal the more

intimate and private aspects of their romantic involvements to mothers (Daddis & Randolph, 2010; Jeffries, 2004), leaving mothers more interested in finding out.

Finally, our hypothesis that maternal wellbeing would be significantly associated with wanting to know more about prudential and multifaceted activities, but not necessarily about personal activities, was partially confirmed. We found that wellbeing was positively associated with mothers' Wave 1 desired knowledge of multifaceted activities, but only for girls, and was marginally associated with more rapid declines over time in wanting to know about personal activities. As a sense of autonomy is inherent in Ryff's measure of wellbeing, our findings suggest that higher wellbeing may enable mothers to grant their teens more autonomy over personal issues as teens grow older. This is consistent with the qualitative responses indicating that mothers did not need to know but were willing to listen if teens wished to discuss personal issues. Given that girls disclose more to mothers about intimate friendships and romantic relationships than do boys (Daddis & Randolph, 2010), greater wellbeing may be associated with mothers' ability to communicate effectively with their daughters and keep the channels of communication open about sexuality.

### *Limitations and future directions*

Our sample was primarily White, middle class, and from the U.S. Therefore, it would be important to examine what mothers from more diverse backgrounds and cultures want to know about their teens' activities. Although we believe that our findings would generalize beyond the specific context studied here, parental concern with protection and safety may be greater for youth in riskier environments or may be lessened when parenting is more challenged. In addition, our focus on mothers was an appropriate first step, given the substantial evidence that fathers are less involved in supervision and monitoring than are mothers (Crouter et al., 2005; Waizenhofer et al., 2004). Nevertheless, differences in what mothers versus fathers want to know should be examined in future research. In addition, we would expect to find different developmental trajectories than those reported here if a broader age range of adolescents were studied. For instance, it is likely that U.S. parents' desires to know about teens' activities increase from early to middle adolescence as teenagers begin to spend more time out of the house and away from direct parental supervision. This bears further examination and also needs to be examined in different ecological contexts, as how much time adolescents spend in school, with peers, and engaging in risky behaviors all may influence the trajectory of parents' knowledge desires.

Although we found consistent and robust associations between desired and perceived knowledge in our study, more research is needed to examine the direction of effects. Wanting to know and knowledge of adolescents' activities are likely to be reciprocal, transactional processes that are both important in understanding the strategies mothers use to obtain knowledge of teens' activities (Crouter et al., 1999, 2005; Waizenhofer et al., 2004). Furthermore, most measures of parental knowledge focus on a very limited set of issues. Our findings indicate that domain differences in maternal knowledge should be considered in future research. This would entail developing measures that tap a broader range of items than most measures do at present.

Finally, future research should examine mothers' different motivations for wanting to know about different activities. It would be worthwhile to determine whether this reflects a focus on teens' developmental needs for autonomy, parents' desires to protect the teen, or parents' needs for control and how these motivations differentially influence parental behavior. This might be profitably examined using person-centered analyses that examine associations between different profiles, parents' strategies for obtaining information about adolescents' activities, and their implications for healthy adolescent development and adjustment. As this suggests, the present study opens up a line of inquiry that could contribute important new information about parenting and adolescent development.

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