

Social parenting: Teens feel closer to parents when they connect online

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A Brigham Young University study found that teenagers who are connected to their parents on social media feel closer to their parents in real life. Credit: Mark Philbrick/BYU

Parents may not be very savvy with social media, but new research shows they shouldn't shy away from sending their teen a friend request on Facebook or engaging them on Twitter, Instagram and other social platforms.

Brigham Young University professors Sarah Coyne and Laura Padilla-

Walker found that teenagers who are connected to their [parents](#) on social media feel closer to their parents in real life.

The study of nearly 500 families also found that teens that interact with their parents on social media have higher rates of "pro-social" behavior – meaning that they are more generous, kind and helpful to others.

Lead study author Sarah Coyne did a Q & A about their findings. The full report appears in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.

Q: How does social media help families feel more connected?

A: You can do a lot on social networking sites. Your kid might post a picture, and you might show support by liking it or making a nice comment, or a status update that does the same kind of thing. It gives more opportunities to give positive feedback or show affection.

Social networks give an intimate look at your teenager's life. It lets parents know what their kids are going through, what their friends think is cool or fun, and helps them feel more connected to their child. It gives a nice little window into what is going on.

Q: What's the typical level of family engagement on social media?

A: Our study asked how often they interacted on social media. Half of the teens in our study reported being on social network sites with their parents and 16 percent interacted with parents every day through social media.

Q: Were more frequent interactions linked to more family closeness?

A: Yes, the more frequently parents used social media to interact with

teens, the stronger the connection.

Q: Parents could take this too far presumably. Did you see any of that in your study?

A: It is the kind of thing that you can take too far. Parents need to be smart about how they use it. I think it is a really great tool to connect with your kids. But just like everything else, it's got to be used in moderation. You don't want to be the parent who posts embarrassing pictures of your kid all the time or makes snarky comments. You have to keep it at the level that's appropriate and respectful of what the teen wants as well.

Q: How much of this is a chicken-and-egg phenomenon? If a family was already close to each other, the parents would seem more likely to friend their children on social media.

A: We make that point in the paper. Parents who are more connected to their teens in general want to keep that connection elsewhere. I think it's a bit of both – it's bi-directional. As we have experiences in new media, it strengthens bonds that are already there. It's kind of a rich get richer type of thing and cementing what's already there.

Q: So what you see here is just one manifestation of an overall healthy parenting style?

A: Exactly. You don't want these results to get overblown to say, "If you friend your kid on Facebook, you're suddenly going to have a great relationship." It's just one tool in an arsenal that parents have to connect with their teens. This is what teens are doing – they are on [social media](#) already, so it's a nice tool to use.

Q: What's something that surprised you in this research?

A: We also found that overall social networking, independent of parent use, was associated with certain negative outcomes for teenagers. They were more relationally aggressive and had higher internalizing behavior. That was a little surprising to me. We tend to think of [social networking](#) as relatively harmless, and for the most part it really is. But kids who are using it a ton – we had some kids in the study who were using it more than 8 hours a day – some of them show problems in terms of aggression and depression.

Q: Some [teens](#) prefer newer social platforms that haven't caught on with parents as much as Facebook has. What do you say to parents about this?

A: I think it's important for parents to be media savvy and to know where their kids are. A lot of [teenagers](#) are on Twitter and not a lot of parents are on that. If you really want to stay involved with your kid, you can't be afraid to learn new technology, to learn new web sites and to know where your teen is.

Provided by Brigham Young University

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