

Communication helps parent relationships with new college students but has limits

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When young adults first go off to college, more communication with parents generally leads to better relationships, but parents should avoid always initiating it, according to a study led by Washington State

University researchers.

In a paper published in the journal [Emerging Adulthood](#), WSU Assistant Professor Jennifer Duckworth and co-authors found that phone, text, video or in-person [communication](#) made first-year [students](#) feel better about the [relationship](#) with their parents. Students also felt better about the relationship when parents offered support or advice, and when they discussed important topics, such as studying and friendships. However, researchers found negative associations when parents initiated nearly all of the communication.

"That could be indicative of over-involved parenting," said Duckworth, a faculty member in WSU's human development department. "It can be a fine line, but students with so-called 'helicopter parents' could have a more negative view of their relationship with those parents."

The research shows that it's beneficial for parents to regularly stay involved in students' lives, provide support and discuss topics important to students without overwhelming them.

"Text messages are great for a quick check-in that can be very beneficial to the relationship quality," Duckworth said. "If a student feels they have a good relationship, that's indicative of well-being and positive behaviors like more studying and less alcohol and drug use."

The study also shows that frequent communication improves the relationship between familial units.

"We looked at daily levels of parent/student communication, and days with communication were better for the relationship than days without any communication," said Duckworth. "Similarly, days with more communication were better than days with less communication."

The researchers were surprised by how consistent the findings were.

"On days when they communicated, and students were honest with their parents and parents offered support or advice, the students reported they felt more positive about their relationship the following day," she said.

The study looked at the response results of 367 first-year WSU students who took a daily survey for seven consecutive days. The students were compensated up to \$30 if they completed every survey, which was texted to their phones.

Breaking down the data, the authors found several differences. Female students reported more days of communication than males, with more [time](#) spent communicating. They discussed friendships and relationships more, but spent less time discussing time management than males.

Meanwhile, members of racially or ethnically minoritized groups reported fewer days communicating with their parents. While they spent less time communicating in general, students from minoritized groups spent more time talking on the telephone and video chatting with their [parents](#) than other groups. They also reported being less honest and spending less time talking about studying or grades, and drinking or substance use.

"We don't know why this is the case," Duckworth said. "It could reflect cultural or contextual differences, or differences in parenting styles. It's definitely an area for future research."

Duckworth wrote the paper with WSU colleagues Katherine Forsythe, Brittany Cooper and Laura Hill along with Matthew Bumpus, director of research and community impact at Innovia Foundation.

More information: Jennifer C. Duckworth et al, Daily

Communication Between First-Year College Students and Their Parents: Associations With Perceived Relationship Positivity, *Emerging Adulthood* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/21676968241273308](https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968241273308)

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