

Does Adolescent-Parent Communication Moderate the Relationship between Parental Limit Setting and Adolescent Phone Use?

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Abstract

During adolescence, adolescents and parents renegotiate their relationship as adolescents strive for more autonomy. As a result of this increased push for autonomy, parents may feel the need to increase their monitoring and place stricter limits on their adolescent, including limits on their adolescent's use of technology. There is likely to be wide variation in parents' limit setting depending on characteristics of the adolescent-parent relationship. For instance, the quality of communication between adolescents and parents may influence the amount of freedom that parents give their adolescents to use technology. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to examine whether adolescent-parent communication moderates the relationship between parental limit setting and technology use. The sample included 1,036 tenth and eleventh graders (58% Caucasian; 53% female) from schools in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland. Surveys were given to students at school. Results indicate adolescents used the phone less often when there were fewer parental limits and more open communication with parents. In addition, adolescent-parent communication was found to moderate the relationship between parental limit setting and adolescent phone use.

Sample

- 1,036 10th and 11th grade students (53% girls)
- 58% Caucasian; 22% African American, 11% Hispanic, 2% Asian
- Age Range: 14-19 years old; Mean age = 16.15 (SD=.75)
- Adolescents were attending a school in the Mid-Atlantic region

Measures

Technology Use Questionnaire

The Technology Use Questionnaire was used to assess frequency of technology use (watching television, talking on the phone, listening to a stereo/radio, texting, playing video games, listening to an IPOD/MP3 player, working on a computer, and surfing the web). The questionnaire was comprised of nine items with responses ranging from 1 = *none* to 6 = *4 hours or more per day*

Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale

The Parent Adolescent-Communication Scale (Barnes and Olson, 2003) included 20 items and was used to assess communication between adolescents and their parents. A representative item is "I am careful about what I say to my mother/father". The response scale ranges from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Both open and communication subscales were used for this study. Each subscale consisted of ten items. In the present sample, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .92 for adolescent-mother open communication and .78 for adolescent-mother problems in communication. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for adolescent-father open communication was .94 and .82 for adolescent-father problems in communication.

Parental Limit Setting Measure

The Parental Limit Setting measure (PLSM; Turner, Irwin, & Millstein, 1991) included 16 items and assessed how much freedom parents/guardians gave to their adolescents regarding certain activities. An item example was, "Do your parents/guardians allow to stay out with friends until midnight?" The response scale ranges from 1 = *yes* to 0 = *no*. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .75.

Procedures

During the spring of 2007 and 2008, trained research assistants administered surveys to students who provided assent and had parental consent. The survey took approximately forty minutes to complete. Adolescents were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants were assured that their answers would be kept confidential. Upon completion of the survey, the adolescents were given a movie pass.

Results

Hierarchical linear regression models were conducted separately by gender. Parental limit setting and adolescent-parent communication (open communication and communication problems) were assessed at Time 1 and adolescent phone use and texting were assessed at Time 2. Step 1 included control variables – parents' education and adolescent's age. Step 2 included parental limit setting and adolescent-parent communication, and Step 3 included the interaction terms between parental limit setting and adolescent-parent communication.

Boys

For boys, more communication problems with mothers predicted more texting ($\beta = .21, p < .05$). In contrast, more communication problems with fathers predicted less phone use ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$). A significant interaction was found for parental limit setting and open communication with fathers ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$) (see Table 1). This interaction indicated that less open communication with fathers and more parental limits predicted more phone use, whereas more open communication with fathers and less parental limits predicted less phone use.

Girls

For girls, positive communication with parents consistently was related to less technology use. More specifically, more open communication with fathers predicted less phone use ($\beta = -.20, p < .05$) and less texting ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$). In addition, more communication problems with mothers ($\beta = .18, p < .05$) predicted more phone use (see Table 2).

Table 1
Hierarchical Linear Regression: Predicting Boys Phone Use and Texting at Time 2 from Parental Limit Setting and Adolescent-Parent Communication at Time 1

	Adolescent-Mother, Problems	Adolescent-Mother, Open	Adolescent-Father, Problems	Adolescent-Father, Open	Parental Limit Setting	Parental Limit Setting x Adolescent-Father, Open
Phone	.153	.100	-.211*	-.077	.169	.173**
Texting	.213*	.089	-.127	.018	.153	-.125

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.
Note: Standardized regression coefficients presented.

Table 2
Hierarchical Linear Regression: Predicting Girls Phone Use and Texting at Time 2 from Parental Limit Setting and Adolescent-Parent Communication at Time 1

	Adolescent-Mother, Problems	Adolescent-Mother, Open	Adolescent-Father, Problems	Adolescent-Father, Open	Parental Limit Setting	Parental Limit Setting x Adolescent-Father, Open
Phone	.175*	.068	-.148	-.198*	.021	.039
Texting	.131	.085	-.119	-.172*	.037	.069

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.
Note: Standardized regression coefficients presented.

Conclusion

In general, fewer parental limits and more open communication with parents were associated with less phone use (talking and texting). In addition, adolescent-parent communication was found to moderate the relationship between parental limit setting and adolescent phone use. When parental limit setting was low, more open communication with fathers was associated with less phone use. These findings suggest that positive communication with parents may mitigate potentially negative effects that low parental limit setting may have on adolescent technology use.