



Digital Apron Strings

Technology makes it easier than ever to keep in touch with your teenage and young adult kids. Is that good for them—or you?

I WENT TO COLLEGE in that prehistoric era: Before iPhone. If my mother wanted to reach me, she'd have to dial the dorm pay phone—in my memory, forever ringing unanswered at the end of a long, dark hall. How things had changed by the time my own two kids got ready for launching: I was literally in their pockets. Today parents can check out an offspring's party pics on Instagram or monitor their whereabouts using family tracking apps such as Life360.

Is this weird? The Clay Center for Healthy Young Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital says that 71 percent of parents of college students send at least three texts per day to their child at school. Half say they communicate as much with their kids at college as they did when they were at home. (My family was below the mean, making do

with regular “text if you need anything!” reminders, occasional FaceTime sessions and a steady diet of pet photos.) Experts say parents are in the middle of a huge social experiment: Are cellphones a brilliant new tool to provide support to fledgling adults? Or do they just give parents a longer flight path to helicopter indefinitely?

Julie Lythcott-Haims is a former dean of freshmen at Stanford University and the author of *Your Turn: How to Be an Adult*. She's noticed a recent cultural trend toward “intensive” parenting that extends into a child's college years and beyond. Like a dutiful concierge, some parents feel they need to remain available around the clock to solve hassles and meet requests. “It can be hard simply stopping when you get to this next stage of life,” Lythcott-Haims says.

That may be reassuring to worried parents, but it's not necessarily good for the kids. Young adulthood is about establishing independence, says Kayla Reed-Fitzke, an assistant professor of couple and family therapy at the University of Iowa. “It's an important time for what is called differentiation—the process of finding your own identity as separate from, but still connected to, your family.”

So-called helicopter parenting has been associated with lower levels of self-worth in college-age students. These kids need space to develop the skills to cope with life's everyday challenges, says Lythcott-Haims. “That's how they get confidence and a sense that we trust them.”

From what we've heard, the kids aren't necessarily complaining. “This generation grew up with technology,” Reed-Fitzke says. “They may feel it's normal or even expected that parents continue to be highly engaged in this way.” Veronica Arreola of Chicago, mother of a college sophomore, is looking for the right balance. “I gave my daughter a lot of space when she first left. I checked in no more than once a week,” she says. “I was direct: ‘I want to give you the chance to grow.’ A couple of months in, she said, ‘It's OK, Mom! I want you to check in!’”

Renee Nerenberg, a senior at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, video-calls her parents once a week and texts often, adding that her roommate is also close to her family. “They call every night to check in,” Nerenberg says.

So how do you know how much digital communication with your kids is too much? Here are some expert tips on

walking that sometimes confusing line.

Set expectations. Agree on a communication plan. Shoot for a video call every Sunday, for example, but revisit the plan as needed after everyone settles in to this new routine.

Follow their cues. If you're messaging several times a day but your child is replying hours later with a three-word text, step back. Let them set the pace, suggests Kara Kornher, a psychologist who works with students at California State University San Marcos. "Take comfort in the fact your child is making a shift to independence."

A Gender Gap

Average number of texts between college students and their ...

... FATHERS



... MOTHERS



SOURCE: "DIGITAL PARENTING OF EMERGING ADULTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY," SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2021

Empower them. If your kid needs to find a nearby dentist, for instance, you may get a phone call. "Don't swoop in and solve," says Lythcott-Haims. Instead, offer compassion, then ask, "How do you think you're gonna solve that, honey?"

Establish your own boundaries. "If your child is calling you five times a day, I would nudge them towards consolidating the contact," says Kornher. "It's fine to say, 'Let's talk at the end of the day after work, so I can give you my full attention.'" (Of course, if you suspect they are reaching out so often because they are anxious or depressed, address the matter directly, she advises.)

Resist the urge to stalk. It can be tempting to keep tabs by checking your child's Instagram or TikTok. Maybe it's time to hide them from your feed, to give them the privacy you enjoyed back in the day.

Keep it low-pressure. Students, too, may be struggling to figure out the rules of engagement. Charlotte Zehnder, a senior at Middlebury College in Vermont, says that in the day-to-day bustle, she sometimes feels "guilty" for not reaching out to her parents more often. Catherine Newman, mom of two and author of *How to Be a Person*, offers a low-key, high-tech suggestion. "My family has an ongoing group chat," she says. "I might suggest everybody share a picture of their weekend, or I'll post an update about the cat. It keeps us connected without being oppressive to anybody."

After all, in what will seem like mere minutes, your children will be grown and launched. Once they're no longer dependent, their relationship with you becomes largely voluntary, says Newman, "and that's a beautiful thing."

—Jennifer King Lindley



Outsmart Your Tax Refund

Use strategy to benefit from this lump sum

GEN XERS BEAR the biggest tax burden of any generation—but 3

out of 4 households get a refund from Uncle Sam each year. How best to spend it? According to Jim Blankenship, a certified financial planner in New Berlin, Illinois, a tax refund is a great way to accelerate goals such as saving for retirement or paying off debt. Or to invest in yourself by taking a course. To avoid foolish splurges, decide in advance what you'll do when the payment arrives. Studies show that making a plan increases the odds that you'll follow through. —Emily Guy Birken

MY FIRST TIME ...

BEING OFFERED A 55+ DISCOUNT

AS I UNLOADED my shopping cart, I felt the 20-something cashier looking my way. Then she asked the Question:

"Are you eligible for our senior discount?"
Ooof.

After a lifetime of being pegged as younger than I am—shout-out to my small stature, sunny disposition and liberal use of sunscreen—her question sent me searching for an explanation. The supermarket's 10 percent discount is for people 55 and older. *But I was only 54½!* What had nudged me into discount territory in the cashier's eyes? Was it that I had recently stopped coloring my hair? Were my crow's-feet getting deeper? I couldn't help feeling a little deflated. I usually love a bargain, but I couldn't accept this one,



as I told the cashier with a forced smile.

Most days I don't feel like I'm in my 50s, so to be seen as a "senior" was a bit of a shock. But as I thought more about the experience, I started to see the upside. When you spend most of your life looking younger than you are, it's easy for others to dismiss you or not take you seriously. In a way, it felt good to be seen for who I am: a mature woman, sure of her worth and counting down the days to a permanent 10 percent off. —Rachel Buccì

Illustration from top right: Gady Images; Illustration by Sally Crawford; AARP; Jay Mink (2)

MEMBER CHECK LIST

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