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Are students, parents too connected?

Advice just a click away, but some say easy access hinders independence

By Angie Leventis Lourgos, Tribune reporter

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Nineteen-year-old Taylor Matichak calls her mom several times a day, in between the flurry of text messages they send one another discussing academics, social life or just daily chit-chat.

Though the sophomore at the University of Missouri in Columbia spends most of the year more than 300 miles from her family's Plainfield home, the distance seems to evaporate with technology.

"I like it because we can stay close," said the teen, who says she initiates most of the calls and texts.

It's profoundly different from the college days of her mother, Debbie Matichak, 52, who remembers waiting in long lines at her dormitory pay phone to make the obligatory Sunday collect call home.

Keeping in touch with parents was more expensive and time-consuming when she attended the University of Denver three decades ago. But as college students prepare to descend on campuses in the coming weeks, many will find that with the ease of cell phones, unlimited text message plans, e-mail, Facebook, and Skype, they can have near-constant access to mom and dad.

"It's changed the experience of being away at college," said James Boyle, president of College Parents of America, based in Arlington, Va. "A generation ago, when your parents said goodbye and drove away, many (students) didn't see their parents again until Thanksgiving."

But some experts fear this communication shift could hamper the independence of older teens at a time when they traditionally come into their own.

"Sometimes these students are not being as autonomous or self-sufficient as they should be," said Barbara Hofer, psychology professor at Middlebury College in Vermont and co-author of the book "The iConnected Parent."

"Staying close is different than being dependent," she said.

Her 2008 study of students at Middlebury and the University of Michigan found that students on average contacted their parents 13 times a week, mainly via cell phone calls and e-mails, though text messaging and Skype seem to be growing in popularity.

This is a marked shift from the students' parents, who reported calling home about once a week when in college, making calls that were often three minutes long or less because the costs were so high.

Much of the change stems from the rising use of technology among all age groups. A Pew Research Center survey this year found 40 percent of adults use the Internet, e-mail or instant messaging, up from 32 percent in 2009. Seventy-two percent of adults reported sending or receiving text messages compared with 65 percent last year. Data also show that roughly three-quarters of 12-to-17-year-olds own cell phones compared with 45 percent in 2004.

Hofer said problems arise when these electronic conversations enter "regulatory" territory: Parents reminding their student about assignments, making course schedule decisions, monitoring posts on Facebook or telling the child how to handle basic conundrums of life, from questions about washing machine settings to trouble with professors.

The immediacy of today's technology can also chip away at self-reliance, Hofer said. Hofer found that students often go straight to their parents in the midst of a crisis rather than figuring out solutions or handling the emotional fallout on their own.

Another problem dips into academic dishonesty: Hofer said one in five students reported having their parents edit their papers online, a practice that might violate the honor codes of many colleges and universities. While helping a child with a paper at the kitchen table in junior high or high school might be appropriate, sending a paper back and forth for editing can amount to the parent doing all the work, which means the student isn't learning to do it alone, Hofer said.

She recommends parents shift conversations to helping students learn how to make the decision or solve the problem rather than giving answers, a practice that must start when the student is an adolescent living at home.

Winnetka parent Deb Guy, 55, said it takes discipline to structure communication appropriately because it's so easy for teens or parents to make a quick phone call. She sees a lot of parents making decisions for their teens or young adults, and agrees that separation needs to start earlier than the day a child is sent to college.

"(Parents) want to be there, but they need to let go," she said. "They need to send their child back to the problem."

It might sound counterintuitive, but Guy said one of her most gratifying times as a parent stemmed from lack of communication with her daughter Madalyn Guy, who was 19 last semester and studying in Rome without access to a cell phone. Madalyn had to navigate a foreign city, choose her courses — even go to the emergency room — without her mother's help.

Deb Guy found the lack of communication unnerving at first. But when she visited Madalyn abroad, she was proud to watch as her daughter took charge and made plans, as an adult would.

"She made every decision on her own, and I saw the value of that," she said.

While technology has undoubtedly increased contact between parents and college students, Boyle cautions against overgeneralizations about whether this is a positive or negative trend because each student's needs are different. While he sees a danger in mixing "helicopter parenting" with the array of electronics available today, he can also see that more contact with parents might be helpful if a student is going through a tough time.

"It's certainly better than the alternative, which is no communication at all," Boyle said. "There's a valid role for parents to play in terms of a support system."

But he does wonder if the onslaught of technology might be replacing quality communication with quantity. Boyle still has a box of letters his mother, who since passed away, sent him when he was a student at Northwestern University. He wonders if she would have written if they could have had a quick phone or text conversation as he walked to class along Sheridan Road.

As for the Matichaks, they disagree with the premise that more contact hinders a students' autonomy. Taylor Matichak says she's very independent: She might ask her mom's opinion about her coursework or class schedule, but that's just guidance she can accept or reject.

They also keep certain boundaries. While they might text and call one another, they don't e-mail and they're not friends on Facebook, a medium they both believe should be reserved for Taylor Matichak and her peers.

Debbie Matichak, who wishes she had more communication with her parents during college, says she just likes to check in and know that Taylor's all right.

"I can help reinforce the decisions that she's making," she said. "I know that she's OK, even though she's five hours away."

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