

Chapter 8

Parent–Emerging Adult Relationships in the Digital Age: A Family Systems Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood is a period of life characterized by increased individuation and independence. For emerging adults to successfully navigate this process, many aspects of the parent-child relationship must be renegotiated, including rules and expectations related to communication. The emergence of digital communication technology has provided an added layer to this process. This chapter summarizes research related to the influence of digital technology on parent-emerging adult relations. Early findings suggest that digital influence on this stage of development is complex. This chapter employs a Family Systems perspective to offer insight into how current and historical family functioning influences choices related to the use of digital communication technology and how these choices affect the development of emerging adults. Implications for practice as well as avenues for future research are offered.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Emerging adulthood, the time of life between the ages of 18 and 29, is characterized by exploration and instability. The goal of this period is the development of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2015). Though many emerging adults navigate the journey toward adulthood successfully (Arnett, 2007), the instability that coincides with self-exploration triggers increased stress (Arnett, 2015; Asberg, Bowers, Renk, & McKinney, 2008; Peer, Hillman, & Van Hoet, 2015) and self-doubt (Peer & McAuslan, 2016) for some. Social support is critical for buffering the negative impacts during this time (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006). Parents serve as primary sources of such support, particularly during the early stages of emerging adulthood when individuals are beginning the process of establishing an identity independent of their family. As emerging adults work toward individuation, they maintain emotional connections

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with their parents (Lee, Mazaros, & Colvin, 2009). Moreover, healthy development during this stage of life is intimately related to family relationships, yet change and instability in these relationships are also part of emerging adult experiences (Aquilino, 2006).

Digital technology has revolutionized the manner in which emerging adults and their parents communicate with each other (Clark, 2011). As “digital natives,” emerging adults consume approximately 12 hours of digital media per day (Arnett, 2015). Cell phone usage, text messaging, and social media websites have become the preferred methods of communication among emerging adults. Digital technology has also become a main platform for communication for families and has greatly expanded the opportunities and frequency for emerging adults and their parents to communicate. Digital technology allows emerging adults and their parents to be in contact constantly and nearly instantly, wherever they may be and at any time.

Digital communication technology acts as an “electronic tether” between emerging adults and their parents (Hofer, 2008), which may impact emerging adult development and adjustment (Ramsey, Gentzler, Morey, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). On the one hand, digital communication can enhance autonomy through the provision of a tool that individuals can use to efficiently gain needed support from parents, sometimes making it easier and less stressful to make important decisions. Emerging adults, for example, have reported that they rely on the support that they receive from their family through digital technology modalities (Arnett, 2015). On the other hand, this “instant access” can also serve to stifle developmental progress through overreliance on parents and in some cases through a continuation of dysfunctional family patterns via a new means. It is therefore critical to understand how evolving digital technologies influence the changing nature of parent-child relationships and how they can support and/or hinder healthy development of the emerging adult. In turn, it is also important to assess various factors related to the quality of the parent-child relationship (i.e., level and types of support provided, emotional closeness, level of conflict, and attachment patterns) and how they influence the use of digital technology to communicate (Ramsey et al., 2013).

In this chapter, I explain the potential effects of digital communication on parent-child relations during this stage of development. I use a theoretical framework, especially the Family Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996), for understanding the impact of various aspects of family functioning on the successful integration of digital technologies into communication between parents and emerging adults. Specifically, I point to the importance of parents and children renegotiating their relationship during this period by discussing and creating new rules, expectations, and boundaries. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion about applications for family life education and clinical practice as well as implications and opportunities for future research based on the current research findings.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ON PARENT-CHILD RELATIONS DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

In Western society, adulthood is highlighted by independence and self-sufficiency. Emerging adults experience a sense of feeling “in-between,” as they have achieved some level of independence that differentiates them from adolescents, yet they still require emotional, material, and financial support from parents (Arnett, 2015). To successfully navigate this time of life, emerging adults must move toward self-responsibility and away from dependency upon their parents. The very nature of their relationship with their parents must evolve for this to be fully realized.

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