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When parents are too connected

How parents can cut the texting tether and free their kids for greater success



The author with her daughter, Ruby Credit: Anne Bokma

By **ANNE BOKMA**

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When I dropped my daughter Ruby off at her dorm for her first year at McMaster University in Hamilton last September, the first thing I wanted to do when I got home was text her to make sure everything was OK. I fought the urge to reach out that day — and the next. I had made myself a promise that no matter how much I missed her or was curious about how she was faring, I would mostly leave it to her to initiate contact. There were many times when her absence felt like an ache and my itchy fingers would reach for the phone. But I held firm.

As a mother who has always been prone to hover, I didn't want to be one of those parents who couldn't let go when her kid goes off to university — you know, the one who incessantly texts her kids, calls them to wake them on exam day, polices their grades, edits their papers and intervenes if there's a conflict with a professor. These are the parents who call campus police when they can't immediately reach their child by phone. They've even been known to follow their kids to university — USA Today has reported on parents' relocating or buying a second home to be close to their college-bound kids.

The only regular contact Sandra Green*, a 50-year-old Toronto real estate agent, had with her parents when she was in university 30 years ago was a Sunday night call from the pay phone in her residence. But when her first-born went to Brock University in St. Catharines to study film last year, she expected they'd touch base more often — and was devastated when she rarely heard from him.

"I would reach out by text and his responses would be very brief," said Green, who doesn't want her real name used to avoid embarrassing her son. She told herself not to take it personally, but says she felt like "a jilted lover" and experienced jealousy when her friends would tell her about texts they received from their kids. When her son came home at Christmas she blew up at him for not being in touch more. "He looked at me like I was looney tunes," said Green.

We can miss our kids terribly when they head off to university. In our speed-dial culture it's easy to instantaneously be in touch with them. But that constant communication can rob students of the chance to develop into resilient and independent adults who are confident about navigating their own way in the world.

In her research, Barbara Hofer, a psychology professor at Vermont's Middlebury College

and co-author of *The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up*, found the number of weekly contacts between parents and their university kids was 22 times a week, up from 13 times a week in 2007. Most of this is fuelled by texting.

“Frequent communication is related to lower autonomy, lower GPA and parental regulation of academics and behaviour,” said Hofer.

Tempted to text too much? Here are eight signs you might be over-connecting:

1. You get in touch at all hours. Barbara Hofer, a psychology professor at Middlebury College, suggests you and your child come to an agreement about when — and how much — to be in touch before school starts. Regularly scheduled phone calls, she says, can provide a more meaningful connection than hasty back-and-forth texting.
2. You're always the one initiating contact. It's best if there is some “mutuality to the initiation of contact, so students have some choice about the frequency and make the decision to reach out to their parents,” said Hofer. Also, it's typically mothers who initiate contact. Hofer's research found students miss hearing from their fathers. “Dads could pick up the phone more. They seem to do this more with sons and it's female students who especially want more contact with dads,” she said.
3. You get anxious when you aren't in regular contact. Anxious parenting can lead to anxious kids, said Toronto psychologist Alex Russell, author of *Drop the Worry Ball*. “When our kids come to us and we are anxious about their anxiety, we can create an anxiety reverberation chamber.” If you are constantly fretting about how your kid is faring, Russell advised getting help to deal with your own anxiety “so that you can work through some of those feelings that may be causing you to over-manage your kid's life.”
4. You direct the conversation. Are you listening to and reflecting back what your child is saying or are you offering unsolicited advice and instruction? Kids who feel lectured will start to dread contact with their parents. “Be curious, not intrusive,” said Russell. “What kids want are parents they can download their experiences to.”
5. You always try to fix things. “Rushing in too quickly robs emerging adults from solving their problems themselves,” said Hofer. Russell agrees: “We chronically underestimate our children's emotional resilience. When we act like they can't handle things, that takes away their confidence.”

6. You underestimate the good work you've done as a parent. Russell says parents need to trust the care they've provided while their children were growing up will give them a firm foundation in life. Green, the parent who once felt like a jilted lover, knows this to be true. Even though her son still doesn't get in touch very often, he recently called her to tell her he was on his way to emergency to get a few minor stitches after a fall. "He was feeling vulnerable and wanted to connect," she said. "I think he really does know I'm here if he needs me."

** Name changed by request.*

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