

Chapter 2

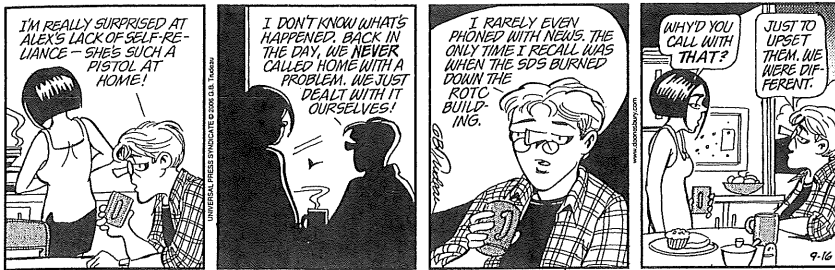
The Electronic Tether

Communication between Today's College Students and Their Parents

"This was hard," says Annie, as she hands her advisor a draft of her honors thesis. It's tough to imagine anything being hard for Annie. An athlete at an elite Division III college, she has just returned from a challenging semester studying abroad. Annie explains why it was so difficult: "It's the first time in my college career that I know so much more about a topic than my dad does." It's also the first paper that Annie, a senior in college, has done without her dad's editing help. She seems proud to have finally crossed that threshold, to recognize that she is capable of doing her own work without his help.

As stories like this surface at campuses across the country it has become clear that many students, not just Annie, are using email, cell phones, iPhones, BlackBerrys, computers, Skype, and whatever new technology they can find to connect with their parents on issues large and small and to get their help. And they are connecting a lot. If you

are a parent of a college student you might wonder whether you should be emailing and calling your child so frequently. College students are supposed to be more independent than they were in high school. Before cell phones became a fact of life, college kids had to be more self-reliant.



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The Transition to College

The first research study at Middlebury began with the simple goal of finding out what happens to communication with parents when students first head off to college. The initial questions, posed in focus groups and online surveys, were basic. To students preparing to enter college we asked: How much do you expect to talk to your parents when you go to college? At the end of their first semester we asked the same students: How much do you actually talk to your parents now that you're in college?

Before arriving at college, students predicted that they would be talking to their parents (in any form: cell phone, email, etc.), on average, *once a week*. This was in line with what many middle-aged adults, now parents of these students, recalled from their own college experience. We also found that most students hadn't actually discussed with their parents how often they'd talk. They'd just made assumptions, which they imagined their parents shared.

Focus groups in the summer showed that recent high school grads looked forward to a life with less contact with mom and dad. They talked excitedly about leaving home, getting to make decisions on their own, and no longer answering to parents on a daily basis. As one son proudly reported, "I'm trying to have a realization with my parents that they're not always going to be the support system, the control system. I'm trying to create my own support system." This confirmed our early assumption: students envisioned college as a parent-free zone and an important step in growing up, an altogether exhilarating prospect. They believed that, once they set foot on campus, these changes would happen overnight. Based on all of this, their assumption of a weekly call seemed reasonable to them.

The results of the follow-up to the first survey study radically contradicted the students' predictions. Surveys of the same students at the end of the first semester showed that they were in touch with their parents an average of *10.4 times per week*, far more than they (or we researchers) had anticipated. Also surprising was the reaction of the Middlebury students working on the research team, who were only a few years older than the survey participants: the student researchers themselves were shocked by how much had changed during their years in college. Elena Kennedy, a senior whose work on this research became her honors thesis, didn't have much of an attachment to her cell phone when she arrived at Middlebury in the fall of 2002, and much of her class was similar in this respect, if they had cell phones at all. Elena commented, "We didn't carry them around campus with us then." She was surprised that by the time she was a senior the arriving freshmen saw cell phones as indispensable and were seen talking on them everywhere, a significant change in campus culture, and an annoying one to many outgoing seniors.

Most important, when Elena's class began college in 2002 very few parents used cell phones regularly. As cell phones blanketed the

college market and then the parent market, a communications revolution between college kids and their parents occurred.

This revolution brought about substantial change, and we wondered how well this new generation of students was adapting to it. For starters, wouldn't it be depressing for a student to expect all that independence and then, once he got on campus, still be connecting with his parents every day? We thought so, but the data told another story. Most students weren't unhappy about it at all—even though there was a huge discrepancy between their expectations and the reality of what was happening during that first semester. This was a fascinating, if somewhat disturbing, finding.

Parent Involvement Continues in College

The fundamental question remained: How healthy is such frequent contact? The surveys given to the same students both before college and at the end of the first semester in 2005 revealed reason for concern. Parents who closely managed their kids during high school—reminding them to study for a test, clean their rooms, write papers that were due—were at it again in college, abetted by cell phones and email. Parental supervision that might have naturally ebbed when an adolescent left home now continued during the first term.

The students gave examples of how their parents were involved in their lives in unprecedented ways. In a focus group of a dozen students, conducted at the end of the first year of college, one young man admitted that his mom had copies of all four of his course syllabi and called regularly to remind him of due dates and to check on his progress. (“Have you started the paper for European History that's due on Friday?”) None of the other freshmen in the room acted as if this were unusual. Meanwhile those of us running the focus group struggled not to show our concern about the young man's

casual accounting of his mom's over-the-top involvement. By now, developmentally, he should have been managing his own studies and asserting his independence from mom. Equally alarming was how readily the other students viewed his mom's behavior as perfectly natural. Even the college seniors on our research team were stunned about "this new generation" and their dependency on their parents.

This kind of behavior was rare before cell phones, unlimited calling plans, and the involved parent culture. Our professional concerns about the psychological impact of this emerging "electronic tether" continued to deepen. Having heard the anecdotal buzz about "soccer moms" and "helicopter parents," journalists then began to report on the research. *Newsweek*, for example, covered the Middlebury results in a 2006 story titled "The Fine Art of Letting Go," and the research was cited throughout 2006 and 2007 in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other publications. Clearly we professionals weren't alone in our concerns about this new trend.

Communication with Parents during the College Years

As news of the survey spread, some burning questions began to emerge. Was all this talk between parents and kids something that just happens in the first semester of college? Was it something that only families at elite liberal arts colleges did? Was it just another case of the helicopter crowd going berserk?

It was time to dig deeper. So we surveyed the same students at the end of their second semester. Perhaps contact with home would have dropped off as homesickness abated and kids learned to make decisions on their own. But it hadn't. Parents and kids were still chatting away. In a third study, developed by senior Katie Hurd, we found that even students who had taken a semester off before attending college

(to travel or work or do an internship) were still in constant touch with mom and dad. We thought they might be more independent, given the time away from home on their own, but that too proved false.

Julia, for example, spent a fall abroad before matriculating at college her first year. She learned to manage her own time, money, and life, along with a new relationship. She talked to her parents only occasionally. She felt like an adult! But that changed once she arrived at college. Now her mom, in California, calls every day. An exasperated Julia explains why: "Because, she says, 'I spent eighteen years knowing everything about your life! Why would I want to stop now?'" Meanwhile the daily calls about family life and drama have increased Julia's homesickness, which is now worse during her sophomore year at college than when she was a continent away two years ago. Julia says she feels like less of an adult at 20 than she did at 18. Parents who call too frequently are providing constant reminders of home in ways that can prolong homesickness rather than alleviating it.

This constant connection to home was more pervasive than we had expected and also appeared to have some genuine disadvantages. To get to the heart of this phenomenon, Barbara and thesis student Nancy Fullman enlarged the study and, in the fall of 2006, launched a new survey of nearly a thousand students and their parents, this time at both Middlebury and the University of Michigan. Large, public, and in the Midwest, Michigan provided a different perspective from Middlebury's. The new survey was designed to explore students' contact with parents across all four years of college and examine whether all this talking was an isolated phenomenon or was exaggerated at a private liberal arts college. We also wanted to make the surveys as relevant as possible, so students on the research team drew from their own experiences to help develop the questions, and we ran more focus groups to make sure we were tapping student perceptions fully in the kinds of questions we asked.

How Often Are College Students Talking to Their Parents?

Our new survey respondents dashed our expectations once again. We had thought that, if college students stayed in constant touch with their parents throughout their first year, perhaps the decline came later. Maybe the calls and emails would drop off as students grew more confident about their own decision making, study skills, and independent lives. But we found quite the opposite.

The average number of times that families communicated was *13.4 times per week*.

It didn't matter what year students were in school. Whether they were sophomores or seniors, they all talked about the same amount of time, mostly on cell phones (owned by 97 percent of students in the study), followed by email. Students at both schools stayed in contact with their parents at about the same rate (13.5 times per week at Middlebury and 13.2 at Michigan). Later, Abby's reporting based on interviews with students, parents, administrators, and faculty members at schools around the country showed a similar pattern, with minimal variations. So this wasn't a geographic or small private college trend after all; iConnected parenting was a growing national phenomenon.

In addition it doesn't appear to have subsided since then. A 2008 follow-up study of the Middlebury and Michigan students, conducted with Middlebury thesis student Catherine Timmins, showed that contacts with parents continued to average just over 13 times a week.

Who's Making All These Calls? (It's Not Just the Parents)

The Middlebury-Michigan study also crushed the assumption that parents were driving this new behavior. Kids were speed-dialing mom

and dad almost as much as their parents were calling them. Considering that students themselves were reporting this behavior, it is likely that they might underreport it and very unlikely that they would be exaggerating it.

The mutuality of the contact was surprising. The media coverage seemed to suggest that hovering parents weren't willing to let go and were simply descending uninvited into students' lives, but that wasn't the case. Students were willing to accept and even invite their parents into their college lives. For example, one upbeat student described her communications from just the previous week—a call with mom to talk about auditions for a musical group, an email about news from home, a call to dad to get advice about course registration, and then a call with mom about dorm issues—and the list continued. This frequent back and forth, the routine recounting of daily life, and the seeking of advice from parents now seemed to be, for many, a natural extension of family life into the college years, no matter the distance apart.

Again and again throughout our later interviews students who at first downplayed their own contact with parents would often raise their initial figures, supporting the survey findings. A college junior from the West Coast heard the results of the survey and said it seemed outrageous, given that she talked to her mom “only” about three times a week. “Who are these people?” she asked disdainfully. Her tone changed, though, as she revised her estimates aloud: “Oh, but my dad does call me every day on his way to work, and we all email. So I guess it does fit.”

In only a few years this continuous contact—a cultural sea change—has become commonplace for many families. Students themselves seem unaware of just how connected they are and what this might mean for their own growth and independence, or how different their college experience is even from that of their older siblings (or their parents!).

Table 1. Frequency of Communication between College Students and Their Parents

Year	Weekly contacts	Parent / student initiated
First-years	13.4	7.1 / 6.3
Sophomores	13.2	7.0 / 6.2
Juniors	14.1	7.3 / 6.8
Seniors	13.0	7.0 / 6.0

Student Differences

The averages in Table 1 describe what's normative; not everyone talks that much, and the data show considerable variability among the students. Some were proud of sticking to the weekly call and occasional email. Take Will, for instance, a sophomore at the University of Connecticut, whom Abby met during her reporting. "I lived with my parents for eighteen years. I don't need to talk to them every day now!" he said. In fact he said, "It was mom's idea to call at least once a week." Even then, he won't take her call immediately if he's hanging out with friends, studying, or eating. His reason: "She won't let me get off the phone." Instead he calls her back when it's more convenient for him and other people aren't around.

Some students do tease their peers who can't go a day without a call to or from mom and dad. Will's friend Tim, whose parents are divorced, calls both families (mom and stepdad, father and sister) every night. Tim's freshman roommate asked him repeatedly, "Why are you always calling your family?" Many students talk frequently to mom and dad, but some of those who talk the most are quickly marked by their peers. Some are made fun of outright, while others feel a hint of disapproval.

We also found dramatic extremes, including a few kids who were estranged from their parents and didn't want much contact at all. On

the other end of the scale were students who needed frequent reassuring contact. Some of these were driven by concerns that were clinical in nature (students struggling with depression, for example). Others were going through rough patches of academic difficulty, loneliness, or personal confusion.

The research team expected to find aspects of students' backgrounds that might predict their level of communication. By design, students in the survey were a diverse group, varying in all sorts of interesting and important ways. We thought that a student's ethnic background or parents' income might affect the level of communication. But we found no differences—not by income, ethnicity, race, or distance from home. Maybe if they had gone to boarding school they became independent earlier? No, not according to our data. As one student noted, "I talk to them more now than I did at boarding school because now I have more time." The relatively unstructured nature of college gives students choices about their time, and some are eager to fill it, perhaps unaccustomed to the freedom of their new schedule. After a lifetime of overscheduling, all this free time makes some students uncomfortable; now, with just a few hours of class each day, they have to figure out how to fill the rest of their day. Phone calls to parents who are always willing to listen can easily fill the void. One mother told Abby, "Whenever [my daughter] was bored, I was her entertainment. If she was waiting for someone outside to have lunch or when she got to practice early or between breakfast and class, I'm her entertainment."

Only the sex of the child made a difference in frequency of communication, although not as much as expected. Daughters talked more to their parents than sons did: 14.5 compared to 11.3 times per week. On average both male and female students talked more with mom than dad—a pattern likely begun in childhood—and daughters even more so. A quarter of the students reported talking equally to

both parents, and male students reported that this was more likely to be the case (37 percent vs. 20 percent).

How Satisfied Are the Students with So Much Communication?

About 75 percent of the students surveyed seemed happy with how much they talked to their parents. Remarkably those who were dissatisfied were likely to want *more* talk, not less. On the extreme end, one student commented on the survey, “It’s hard to get everything in a simple telephone conversation. If there was a way to meet for coffee every day and chat, then things would be perfect.” People who went to college a generation ago are not likely to recall wishing they could have met mom and dad at their version of Starbucks every day to process their college experience.

This is a radical change, and from a psychological viewpoint, it’s also of concern. Some students voiced their own worries: “I actually feel like I contact my parents too much, not the other way around.” Parents can help students make this transition by not being always available. That way their kids will have the space and motivation to make new friends at college. The danger of mom as “best friend” is that a child doesn’t have as much need for a new friendship with a peer, which takes effort to develop. If kids are busy chatting a couple of times a day with mom, they also have less time to find potential friends.

Yet for some kids even all this talking isn’t enough, particularly when it comes to dads. More than a quarter of the students in the study (27 percent) expressed a desire to talk more often with dad; daughters in particular (33 percent) wanted more connection. Moms might want to consider handing over the phone more often to dad or encouraging him to initiate some calls himself.

Table 2. Student Satisfaction with Parent Contact, in percentages

	Contact with Mother			Contact with Father		
	Want less	Satisfied	Want more	Want less	Satisfied	Want more
Females (n=578)	7	77	16	4	63	33
Males (n=319)	4	80	16	3	76	21

Although most students were content with how often they connect with their parents, *they didn't feel that their satisfaction was shared by their parents*. More than half the students believed their parents wanted even more contact.

Table 3. Student Perceptions of Parental Satisfaction with Contact, in percentages

	Perceptions of Mother's Satisfaction			Perceptions of Father's Satisfaction		
	Want less	Satisfied	Want more	Want less	Satisfied	Want more
Females	3	46	52	3	43	54
Males	2	36	62	1	56	43

How Do Parents Feel?

Eager to get parents' perspectives, we added a parent survey to the mix. Although students might be surprised to learn this, most parents (70 percent) were in fact generally satisfied with how much they talked to their kids and typically didn't want more contact, or at least not to the degree that students thought they did. One father of a se-

nior woman commented, “We love our kids dearly, but do not believe we should go along with them to college via cell phone and Internet (aka ‘electronic leashes’!). We are glad to have open dialogue with them on most every topic; however, we tend to respond rather than initiate, in an attempt to keep contact from being too frequent. I also try hard to avoid offering unsolicited advice. For us, no news is typically good news.” Still, a sizable group of parents (29 percent) did want more communication. The mother of a freshman said about her daughter’s lack of contact, “We gently remind her that we would like to hear from her more often.”

Kids are often aware of their parents’ desire for more contact, but some become so absorbed in their college experience that they don’t have the time or inclination to meet it. At Grinnell College, which prides itself on its close-knit community, one student told Abby, “When I came to Grinnell, the first week or so I called every day, maybe more than once. Then the community kind of sucked me in and I became so involved with activities and friends and schoolwork that the focus of my life kind of shifted from my life at home into my life at Grinnell. Now I definitely talk to them several times per week, maybe twice (along with an occasional email or text). I am fully aware that my family would like more. And it’s been hard for my friends [outside of Grinnell] and family. There’s something that Grinnell offers me that other people can’t.”

This healthy attitude about forging her own life while staying in contact, but neither incessantly nor with too much dependence, isn’t shared by her midwestern hometown friends, scattered at schools across the country. Their reaction to her amount of contact underscores how pervasive parental contact really is. “They’ve been surprised when they found out that I don’t talk to my parents every day. They are like, ‘Are you serious?’”

Parents, however, seldom seem to want less contact; only 1 percent of those in our study did. Nor are they particularly aware that

their kids might want less (also 1 percent). Some parents, however, even if they were satisfied overall, worried that there were times when their kids were calling too often. One father expressed the basis for his concern: “It’s just that there’s so much more communication than we had with our parents when we were in school. I just wondered if he was connecting with his peers very well.” Overall most parents (88 percent) believe that their kids are happy with how much they connect; only 11 percent believe their kids might want even more.

It seems critically important for parents and their children to learn to talk about how much contact is enough, and to become sensitive to when the calls are coming too frequently. Parents might consider backing off a bit and letting their child take time to explore new relationships. Socializing in a new environment isn’t easy work for some college students, and is seldom as easy as calling parents with concerns, but in the long run it’s the healthier path.

What Are They Talking About?

With all this conversation back and forth—calls, emails, text messages, and the increasingly rare letter or card—we thought it important to find out what students and their parents are talking about. At the most general level, some topics are family staples. Academic talk is common, but these conversations range from the terse (“Fine.”) and mundane (“I wish my Spanish class weren’t at eight a.m.”) to the sublime (“I went to a poetry reading last night and I think it changed my life!”), with doses of whining (“I can’t possibly finish all my reading this week!” or “My econ class sucks.”) and help seeking (“I can’t think of anything to write about for the Intro Psych paper due tomorrow! Got any ideas?”). Daily life—discussion of roommates, sports, social life—and finances, of course, also appear to be conversational mainstays with parents throughout the undergraduate experience. Parents

in the study spoke of the pleasure of being allowed inside this world. One Middlebury mother said, “[My son’s] life is so interesting and stimulating. I have loved hearing about his classes, like hearing about a good play or event. He is a good storyteller and has given us little glimpses into college life.”

Other topics change with both the rhythm of the semester and year in school and the growing maturity of the student. Asked when they might talk to their parents more than usual, students reported two extremes: they call home when they are most stressed and need to vent or when they are bored or have sudden bursts of free time. Others describe some of these calls as “filler,” something to do en route to class or in the lull before dinner. One student summed it up this way: “I only call on my way to the gym. That way I can say, ‘Gotta go now, I’m here!’”

Students also talk to their parents more when they are planning a trip home or have a decision to make, large or small. In an earlier era students likely would have conferred with parents on major decisions and finances, but today’s students are routinely consulting their parents on such matters as how to cook potatoes, change a tire, do laundry, and choose courses or paper topics.

Sometimes this frequent advice seeking suggests that students are overly reliant on parents, but at times it can be a gesture to include parents in their lives. Elena Kennedy, the student whose thesis helped launch this research, called her mom before participating in a formal presentation about the study during her senior year to ask, “Should I dress as a college student or as a professional?” She knew what answer her mom would give (“Professional!”); that was her choice as well. But the conversation gave Elena a way to let her mother share in the excitement of a meaningful event. Others, however, may find that their ability to make their own decisions (as limited as it may be in some cases) begins to atrophy. One student, a sophomore, attended Barbara’s presentation about the study’s results

and decided to act on the findings. He described in an email to her how liberating it was to decide which course to take in the upcoming winter term, a four-week intensive when students take just one elective course, without consulting his mom. It was the first time he had done so.

We recommend that parents whose kids routinely call them about such decisions wait before offering advice. Instead, actively listen, and encourage your child to find the appropriate resources on campus (a professor or academic advisor or friend) to help her make her own decisions.

Each year of college brings new sets of challenges and decisions, as has always been the case, and our survey revealed changes in advice seeking over the four years. First-year students were most likely to request academic help from parents (and it's presumably easier for most parents to give help in an introductory course than an advanced one). One big decision all students make is choosing a major, generally sometime during their first two years, although the timing varies by institution. For many sophomores the issue of study abroad arises.

Most students reported that their parents became involved in these milestones—in some cases, too much so. Some noted that their parents encouraged them to choose a major that the student found interesting and enjoyable (“They just want me to be happy”); others spoke of their parents’ guidance to choose a major with potential for financial gain. Although it might seem reasonable for parents to suggest considering future income when choosing a major, these expectations can negatively affect their children, some of whom will be unhappy with the coursework required. For example, students described plodding through economics courses that hold no interest for them but that are supposedly a path to success.

At some colleges the number of students declaring double majors has soared, and many students report that they have one major

for their parents and another for themselves. One double major in theater and psychology talked about how unhappy his parents would have been had he majored only in theater, but he didn't want to give it up; not surprisingly, however, the strain of doing both was taking its toll. Parents might want to listen carefully when their kids report their plan for a double major and ask them why; they might be trying to live up to their parents' expectations. They might also want to ask themselves whether the stress associated with the heavy commitment required to do a double major is worth it for their child. Many students we talked to are highly sensitive to the current economic climate and want to please the adults who are paying the tuition bills, but they are sometimes deferring their own dreams to do so.

In our student survey data we found that by junior year many students report discussing with their parents the possibility of internships or summer jobs that are helpful for career choices; by senior year the prospect of a job or graduate school looms, as well as issues of relocating, and once again parents offer advice. Discussions of practical career issues appear to increase each year throughout college, and dramatically so between junior and senior year, when discussion of future plans also takes a leap. As a sign of the times, one Michigan student noted, "My father said to make sure I get a job I'm good at and that pays well instead of one I would enjoy more but pays less. He's right—in the end money and power are really all that matters."

For the most part, students respect their parents' advice, especially when they have actually asked for it. But students don't always ask, and it's understandable that parents would fall back on old habits, so that "Eat your vegetables" becomes "Don't forget you need sleep before that test tomorrow." More than one student noted that this kind of admonishment wasn't welcome: "I don't usually ask for their advice, but that doesn't stop them from giving it." Some joked that

the advice was the same regardless of the crisis du jour. One student said, "My dad's general advice is "This will pass, just try to get some sleep and relax." Students seemed to most appreciate advice when they asked for it and when their parents had some expertise in the issue, but they don't appreciate advice that seems meddling. One student moaned, "My mom likes to give advice about relationships, no matter what." Parents who wait until asked their opinion before giving it are likely to find conversations that grow over time toward more depth and reciprocity.

As students begin to inquire about how their parents are doing, conversations become less one-sided. Upper-level students are more likely to report conversations about their parents' lives and work. Each year the conversations include more talk of brothers and sisters, as growing maturity makes it possible for students to weigh in on issues at home. Most students place boundaries around their conversations with parents, but some say they talk about "everything," and they really do mean *everything*, including vivid descriptions of sex, parties, and drinking binges. Even those who aren't that open are more candid in their discussions than most parents remember being with their own parents.

As our research shows, today's college students are in frequent and regular contact with their parents, even though they hadn't planned to be. Few families discuss before the kids leave home when or how to communicate during the college years. In addition, despite all the time on the phone and email, there seems to be little talk among families about how they actually feel about so much communication. And misperceptions abound. Students are talking twice a day to mom and dad and thinking that their parents want even more, which doesn't appear to be the case. We encourage parents of freshmen to have a conversation before the big trip to campus in September about

what would be best—for the student. Ask your child how often he would like to talk. Setting a regular time to catch up can also be beneficial, even when there are short emails, calls, or texts sprinkled into the week.

“Is all this communication good or bad?” we’re often asked. Well, it depends, of course. In the next chapter we talk about the implications for students’ psychological development.