

Tech Life: Ideas & Advice

Tips for Staying Connected to Your College Student

by Elizabeth Mott, Demand Media

When it's time to see your teens off to college, choosing the technology you send along with them can help them succeed in school as well as stay in touch with home base. From the ways that communications devices shape the connections between people, to the differences between generational approaches, to how and how often to communicate, you and your college student must find the right ways to connect without feeling either too close or too distant.

Choosing Devices

Clark University Psychology Professor Dr. Jeffrey Arnett, who directs the school's national Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults, recommends that parents and students choose the devices with which they're most comfortable, pointing out that "most parents prefer the phone, and most kids prefer a combination of texting and phoning, so they usually end up doing some of each." He sees both a [smartphone](#) and a [laptop](#) or [tablet](#) as must-have technology for post-secondary students: "More and more college courses are using electronic texts, so they definitely need a laptop or tablet," he says. "And they need a smartphone to keep in touch with their parents and everyone else."

Life transition expert Natalie Caine of Empty Nest Support Services sees texting as a primary stay-in-touch use of technology for students. "Kids love using text. It is fast for them and they usually get a quicker response from friends and their family with text. Sometimes they don't want to engage and they do want to stay in touch, so text does the job." Author and advice columnist April Masini of AskApril.com reinforces the need for technology and communications to suit the individual as well as the process of staying in touch. "Dad may be someone with whom the kids are more comfortable e-mailing, while Mom is a phone person for them. So even within the same household, the communication may be different."

Generational Styles

Which devices you choose and how you use them can relate directly to generational styles. Arnett points to texting as college-aged kids' preference over email. "Most college kids regard email as old folks' technology. They use it for the sake of their professors and parents, but that's about it."

Caine agrees that texting receives a higher priority than email does. "They don't have to write much, it saves time and is a quicker response back." She notes that without the tonalities of a spoken conversation, it's important to reread a message before sending it and look for anything that could be misinterpreted. Masini suggests making contact in ways that don't mandate a reply. "Send a funny photo with no response necessary, or the link to an interesting article, so that you're communicating, but not requiring them to invest the same way as if you were driving them to school daily."

Involved Parent or Helicopter Parent

Staying connected shouldn't mean becoming a helicopter parent, a behavior pattern named for moms and dads who get too involved in their children's lives. The broad range of ways to communicate can make it tempting to stray over the line between being involved and hovering. Masini reminds parents that college schedules require an adjustment as well as a time commitment. "Remember that just because you have an empty nest, or free time in the morning,

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doesn't mean your child does. In fact, most college-aged kids are trying to adjust to a more competitive classroom environment, classes that require them to find study time, new living arrangements, eating arrangements, and social situations- in other words, they may be busier, legitimately, than you are."

Caine agrees that technology can provide ideal opportunities for your children to be empowered by your ability to listen. "Sometimes they even text, 'where have you been...we always talk on the weekend and you didn't text, Mom and where is Dad?' A great moment for parents when their kids miss them."

Arnett emphasizes responding to your children in terms of their needs. "Some want to keep their distance for a while after they move out, so they can learn how to fend for themselves and make their own decisions. Others need a lot of support and contact from their parents because they don't quite feel up to standing on their own yet. Follow their lead, and let their needs determine the amount of contact, not yours."

Safety & Privacy

Technology can enhance the college years for students and parents alike, especially if you pay attention to the safety and privacy issues that an always-on, always-connected lifestyle can raise. Make full use of a combination of common sense and good technology practice on both ends of the communication continuum that links parents and students. Arnett notes the need to remind kids not to text while they drive. "This can be a big temptation for them, because they are used to being able to text any time, all day long."

Caine recommends choosing smart security responses and being selective about when to post to social media. "Change passwords and pick ones that aren't obvious: no addresses or birth dates. Think before you post on social media. When in doubt about a posting, pass. Don't post when you have been drinking. Don't be all linked together for safety and privacy reasons." Above all, Masini says, be flexible as well as safe: "Adjustment is your new mantra."

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