

Communicating with my College-age Child

Have you ever wondered why your child appears so relaxed and lively while chatting with a friend but seems reserved and reticent when talking with you? Well, you are not alone. Some research shows that the majority of parents and adult children can get irritated with each other at times. *“The parent-child relationship is one of the longest-lasting social ties... This tie is often positive, but it also commonly includes feelings of tension,”* said Kira Birditt, Professor of the Life Course Development Program at the University of Michigan.



College-age kids are going through a lot of changes in their lives. This might be their first time living away from family, being involved in a committed romantic relationship, wondering about their future careers, and establishing their personal identities. Support from family, especially parents, plays a crucial role in their successful adjustment at school and overall well-being.

Even though your intention is to express care, you might sometimes find yourself wondering what you said that turned a conversation sour. You may also wonder how often you should call your children, and what you might want to say to them.

In the book, *You're on Your Own (But I'm Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years* (by Marjorie Savage), the author discusses communication issues between parents and their college-age children including frequency of contact and ways to communicate. Savage shared, in order to know that your children are safe and doing well, *“You don't need 20-minute conversations every day, but you can be in touch by some means at least weekly.”* It is also recommended by some that you allow your children to contact you, rather than calling them, so that they will choose a time when they are most available for a conversation.

It is important to be aware that your children might contact you when something is not going well, but they are not necessarily seeking solutions or advice from you. Instead, it would be more helpful for you to let your children “vent,” and, when necessary or requested, provide ideas, opinions, or assistance.

[College Parent Central](#), a website designed to provide information for parents with college-age children, offers some other general advice when talking with children over the phone:

- **Listen between the lines.** If your children sound upset, try to determine whether this is a momentary mood, whether they are overwhelmed, sad about something specific, homesick, or just tired.
- **Celebrate.** If your children are excited about their activities, celebrate with them. Ask for details about what is going well.

- Ask open-ended questions. Open questions are questions that allow the other person to expand upon their answers. Closed-ended questions allow the other person to respond with a simple yes or no. “Are your classes going well?” may garner a response of “Yes”. Questions such as “What is your favorite class?” or “What is your most difficult class?” or “Who is your favorite professor?” might get the conversation flowing better.
- Use more conversation encouragers and fewer stoppers. One common “conversation stopper” is denial. We might unintentionally discount our children’s experience of a situation by saying something like, “It can’t be that bad,” or “You’re making this seem worse than it probably is”? On the other hand, reassurance is a useful conversation encourager. Sometimes the most appreciated response you may give to your children is simple and sincere reassurance – that you understand, that things will get better, that you’ll be there.
- Accept and trust. If you get the “Can’t talk now, I’m off to do something with my friends” message, accept the response. You may need to learn to let it go and then check back in a day or two. It may also mean that your child is active and involved in his or her college life, and that’s important.

If you become concerned that your child is missing classes, struggling academically, or experiencing signs of anxiety or depression, you may want to encourage them to make an appointment at the **Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)** by calling **(415) 422-6352**.