

Barriers to Parent-Adolescent Communication: What do Insiders Say?

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Abstract: Research shows that the quality of the relationship between adolescents and their parents play a fundamental role in adolescents' development and transition to autonomy and adulthood. One of the important indicators that reflects the quality of parent-adolescent relationship is their communication. Adolescent-parent communication is also an indicator of adolescent's self-esteem, certain aspects of adolescent well-being and their coping strategies (Jackson,1998). However, there are some obstacles to parents-children communication, especially in adolescence period. Using qualitative data from a research conducted by Institute for Family and Gender Studies in 2021 in Ha Noi, this paper is to describe the factors affecting communication between parents and adolescents. Finding shows that adolescents tend to open up with mothers than father. Generation gap is an important factor making communication between parents and adolescent challenging. Moreover, increasing time spent on social media and Internet decreases the time adolescents spend for their interaction with parents and increase risk of parent-adolescent conflict. Time spending together can make parent - adolescent closer but in some cases, too much time can increase risk of conflict between them.

Keywords: Communication; Parent-adolescent relationship; Conflict.

1. Introduction

Communication activities occupy most of daily agenda. There are various purposes of communication, such as getting new acquaintances, getting explanation, giving directions, seeking advices, sharing thoughts. Among them, the main reason of communication is to get and share information

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(Kamaruddin, 2012). Parent-adolescent communication plays an important role in performing family functions during adolescence. A parent-child relationship is considered to be of good quality when there is healthy, open communication between parents and children. Communication between family members is one of the important aspects of interpersonal relationships and is the key to mutual understanding. Positive parent-adolescent communication contribute to preventing adolescents' depressive symptoms, and in controrary, high quality of parent-adolescent communication can improve parental connectedness and family cohesion (Barnes, 1985, Cava et al, 2014, Kapetanovic et al, 2020, cite from Zhang, 2021).

When children enter adolescent period, their association with parents may dramatically differs from previous developmental periods. According to Erikson (1902-1994), adolescents face a developmental crise named identity crise in which they struggle to figure out who they are (what compose their unique identity) and where they stand in the society outside family. Hence, adolescents seek for more autonomy, interdependence and private space, whereas parents may not be well prepared to accommodate with this change and the conflicts that this change may bring about in the relationship between parents and children.

2. Methodological approach

Participants and procedure: This paper uses qualitative data from the research on “Parent-adolescent attachment nowadays”, which was conducted in 2021 by the author and granted by Institute for Family and Gender Studies. Twenty adolescents from 16 to 18 years old were invited to take part in our in-depth interviews. All of them were studying in a high-school in Hanoi. Fithteen of them were living with their parents at the date of interview and five students lived with their single divorced parent.

Key concept: Family communication is defined as the act of making information, ideas, thoughts and feelings known among members of a family unit. In this article, “communication is not just limited to verbal action but it also encompasses of the non-verbal action” (Kamaruddin et al, 2012).

This paper aimes to discover how adolescents experience, view and assign meaning to the communications between them and their parents. One important point of this research is that the survey was conducted in the period of lockdown, so parents and adolescents must stay at home and engage in more

common activities than their living before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore some claims from adolescents such as “We stay at home together 24/24 hours” or “I don’t have any private time because my parents are always around me” are just applicable for this social distancing period.

3. Findings

In general, in-depth interviews point out that due to social distancing, adolescents took part in this study spent their whole time per day at home with parents. Accordingly they talked with each other more than before the outbreak of Covid-19. Adolescents reported that they tended to actively talk with parents about daily activities: learning, health, relationship with their siblings or seeking advices. Meanwhile, their parents supervised and reminded them to focus on their daily duties such as study or housework more frequently.

Our study found some gender differences in parent-adolescent communication, and discovered some common barriers to parent-adolescent communication, namely Internet use behaviors, generation gap, social distancing.

Gender differences

Gender is among important factors related to parent-adolescent communication. Communication patterns differ between the way mothers and fathers treat their children and the way boys and girls respond to their parents. In general, our study found that adolescent girls are more open and active in communicating with parents than boys are.

Adolescents, both boys and girls, reported that they talked with their mothers more often than with fathers. Adolescent girls explained that due to the gender differences, it’s difficult for them to discuss personal issues with father:

“I feel difficult to talk with father. I know that he loves me and in comparison with mom, dad nags less. But I am female, there is a lot of things I cannot tell with dad. Not only the sensitive problems, you know, something about friendship, boyfriend, it’s difficult to talk with father. When my boyfriend picked me up to school, my father stared at him and then, I knew that he should not know about my private life”. (Female, 17 years old).

It is interesting that when girls talk less with their father they cited gender issue, adolescent boys also cite gender issue to explain for the fact that they prefer to talk with their mother than with their father. Boys claimed that because, the expectation of father on them *as a man* is too high, making them

feel annoyed. Fathers tend to expect that their son will be “a man like me”, and they put a heavy burden on school achievement.

“Any time I meet my father, he asks me How is your learning? You are man, you must do this, you must do that... I am so sick of these requests and I think that he wants me to be “a new him” in a version more complete”. (Male, 17 years old).

One more reason was found is that mother often initiated conversation with children. This finding is in the same line with the proposition on gender-based functioning of the mother in family as educating, taking care of children, meanwhile father often participate less in the process of socialization of their children (Collins, 1991).

“I spend more time with mother than with father. My mother knows a lot about my class, my study, my friends. In general, she puts her eyes on every details of my life. Sometimes I feel annoyed, but it is not big problem. For example, last week I was sick. My father stayed at home and my mother went for work. But I still called her to buy pills for me. This is one small example to describe my family: mother knows all and father knows a little”. (Male, 18 years old).

This finding also supports the result of previous researches. Steinberg (1987) explain that the relationship between adolescents and their fathers is often more distant than with their mothers, especially in bureaucratic families or with families whose fathers live far from home (Steinberg, 1987). Researches of Steinberg and Silk (2002) also points out that adolescents tend to be closer to mothers than to their fathers and they tend to share feeling with their mothers. Fathers sometimes are regarded as a source of primary consult for information and material support (Laursen, 2004).

“My father have never said “No” to me. Actually, I dont ask for too much or unreasonably, but if I want to change mobile phone or last year, I had a new electric bike, I always asked my father first. My mother is woman, so she is a little frugal”. (Female, 16 years old).

Discussing the issue of the father's role, author Mai Huy Bich admits that in many different cultures, fathers are often expected to exercise authority through rule-making, rule-enforcing, there exists a gap between fathers and children, especially daughters (Mai Huy Bich, 2003).

Not only sex of parents has relation with parent-adolescent communication but also sex of adolescents. Via in-depth interviews, it's observed that girls are more open than boys and they can actively talk with parents.

“I talk less with parents, I dont know exactly why but I am a male, it’s not neccessary to tell parents anything I think and what I intend to do”. (Male, 17 years old).

“My girl friends often go shopping with parents or go to hair salon with mother. They said that at class. But we are boys, we don’t do that with parents. Briefly, parents and I dont engage in too much activities, and time to talk is less”. (Male, 16 years old).

Various quantitative researches explain that girls are more open to talk with their parents, thus receiving more care, and more encouragement from their parents (Fitzpatric and Marshall, 1996, cited from Ashraf, 2011), so girls tend to communicate more regularly and more openly with their parents.

Thus, the communication between adolescents and mothers seems to be opener, and due to various reasons, adolescents feel difficult to open up with fathers. And girls are more active in engaging in conversation and common activities with parents. Although that this conclusion have only qualitative meaning, but it partly contributes to affirm the gender difference in parent-adolescent relationship.

Internet/ Technology over-use behaviors

Adolescents are born in age of technology and they are new adopters of new technology such as internet, cell phone, social media. It’s difficult to separate adolescents and their lives from Internet use and indeniably, internet has integrated in adolescents’ daily life and it’s not optional anymore, it’s essential. But when adolescents spend so much time on internet, it’s doubt that they will have less family time and poorer quality of family relationship (Ballarotto et al, 2018). In the research of Nguyen Thi Hong Hanh (2020), one of three main reasons causing conflict between parents and adolescents is adolescents' home internet usage. And in this research, it is found that use of technology/internet have bad influence on parents-adolescent communication. Research of Nguyen Thi Hong Hanh (2020) shows that today, adolescents spend many hours a day on surfing internet, online study, chatting with peers, and other online activities. Over-use of Internet/techonology maybe takes adolescent away from interaction with parents and actually, the more time they spent on cells, computers, Internet leads to a lower communication with parents.

In this research, according to these adolescents, they use internet for two main purposes: learning and keeping contact with peers. And they spend more time for online activities than for family interactions.

“In fact, if calculating carefully, it can be said that that the time I spend sitting at the computer or using my cell will be more than time I spent talking with my parents. It took me 8 hours to study in the morning and afternoon. Then I also use facebook and zalo. Chatting with friends is very convenient, we exchange photos or files quickly. Such an age of digital technology. Meanwhile, I mainly talk to my parents at mealtime and after dinner”. (Male, 17 years old).

Moreover, Internet is frequently a source of conflict between parents and adolescents and it makes parent-adolescent communication more difficult. This statement stems from the fact that parents often have doubt about their children’s internet use behaviors and parents seek for restrict adolescents’ time of using internet or their expression of doubt makes adolescent feel not to be respected.

“Before, my parents restricted me from using my phone and online activities. But in this period, I have to use Zoom for online learning, parents have to let me use cell and laptop daily. But despite of online class, I also have numerous online activities: I have to read zalo messages to follow my teacher’s advises, and check the class schedule. Moreover, now we cannot go out, my friends and I have only one way to keep contact is chatting. But any time my parents see me using my cell, they feel annoyed. One day, I saw a very interesting clip, I told my mother, and she replied that “You are stick with your laptop to do what, why don’t you spend time on finding new exercise but watching watching useless clips. Or once I saw a nice house for rent on facebook, I asked my parents to come and see, but they said that I had not focused on studying but only reading pointless news. There are many more stories like that, so in general, I think I will not share much about my online activities with my parents”. (Female, 16 years old).

In the case above, internet does not directly have bad influence on communication, but it can be seen that parents and adolescents confront higher risk of conflict due to internet use behaviors. And it might contribute to widen gap between adolescent and parents, make difficulties for both parties to engage in an open intimate talk.

Generation gap

In this research, generation gap is known as the difference of opinions and attitudes between parents and adolescents. Generation gap is not a new notion, it can be said that parents are familiar to the old, traditional habits, while adolescents are influenced and by the new, experimental ones. So, what seems perfect to parents is outdated for adolescents. In some cases, the way they communicate is different:

“My parents can never change their mind-set and I think they also don't want to do this. In general, parents always think they are right. When I chat with my friends, we talk the way we like, but my parents said that my friends were uneducated. Honestly, nowadays a little swearing doesn't mean that you are well educated or not. There's a lot of people who don't have bad talk, but they still behave really badly. My parents always say that “when I were at same age with you, if I had behaved like you, grandparents would have spanked and punished me”. But the fact is these days were past, nowadays we are not like that. This is the reason makes me feel difficult to open up with my parents. I see that we are in different world”. (Male, 17 years old).

That parents talk over and over the past and make comparison between their children and themselves in the past might cause tension between adolescents and parents. Some times, parents don't listen their opinions and respect their decisions, and for adolescents, this makes the gap become wide:

“Each time I want to talk with parents, I feel a little nervous. Last month, I talked with parents about university choice. I want to choose HANU because I like learning German, but my parents objected immediately, they did not hear my opinions. “You don't know anything, you must focus on learning, we will decide the university for you”. You see, there is one huge generation gap between us. I want to try something new but my parents just want to do what is already arranged”. (Female, 17 years old).

“When I get problem, I talk with my sister. She knows better than my parents. Sometimes I try to have some small talks with my father but he always says “At your age, you should take attention only to study, you should not think about earning money, this is our responsibility. So I think it's difficult to me to do what I dream (opening one nail boutique). Briefly, in my parents' eyes, I am always a kid. So how can I open up with them when anytime I try to have a talk, they deny everything?”. (Male, 18 years old).

In these cases above, it's seen that parents sometimes try to force children into their way of thinking without taking into consideration what their children really wants. When adolescents and parents have difficulties in making them agree with each other, they are put in the state of disappointment. As a result of this situation, adolescents avoid to talk to their parents and parents suppose that their children are not open to them.

“Parents do not respect my opinion, privacy as well as my thoughts. The generational difference and the tyranny of my parents make me feel very stuck in my relationship with my parents”. (Male, 17 years old).

Parents always want the best for their children. But sometimes, parents' requirement might perplex their children and these differences make adolescents feel "misunderstood", "stuck in relationship with parents", "loss of communication with parents".

Social distancing

This survey is conducted in the social distancing period due to Covid-19 pandemic, so all family members stay at home together. It means that the choice to spend time together does not depend on both of parents and adolescent. In these lockdown days, people cannot keep normal contact with outside world and many families have found themselves "imprisoned" in their own home. Normal lifestyle has been changed. Parent-adolescent relationship in general and their communication in particular have been seriously influenced.

Qualitative data shows two sides of the problem. First, some adolescents say that it's "fun" to be together all day and they have more chances to have talks:

"Mom taught me make cakes and we took lots of fun pictures. Mom works at home so she spends more time in kitchen, our meals are also delicious. I help her prepare for meals and this time is quite fun. In kitchen, my mom is quite different, we talk about anything, not only my homework. It's good for us!" (Female, 16 years old).

"We have more time to talk and engage in common activities. My mother and I participate in one online yoga course. My father helps me more in doing maths. Staying at home all day is also quite boring, but my parents install Netflix, the whole family watches movies and I think that we become closer". (Female, 16 years old).

"I think this period consolidated our relationship. During the pandemic, we did a lot of activities together and enjoyed ourselves". (Female, 18 years old).

It should be noticed that these three shares above cited from three adolescent girls, and they become closer to their mothers, not fathers. In these circumstances, mothers and daughters have mutual concern and they enjoy their time themselves.

But each family has its own story, and not all families can deal fairly well with the circumstances. In this period, parents must transfer their working lives to the home environment, adolescents' educational activities have been carried out at home. Evidently, parents have more responsibilities related to care and education

of their children and adolescents have had to participated in more household chores. A lot of conflicts and a lot of disagreements have been occurred.

“I am not lazy. I can do anything. But im fed up with my mother. Any time she saw me, she asks “How is your study? Have you cleaned your room yet? You must do this, do that”. Everything is very simple, I have my tasks and I can handle them. When you are bored with your parents, how can you talk with them?” (Male, 17 years old).

That adolescent and parents stay at home together all day and lack of private space might create negative reactions on both sides. Parents can detect more mistakes of their children, while adolescents think that they have to suffer more stress and pressure from parents' demands. These can lead to minor conflicts, and indirectly create barriers to communication.

“I lost my freedom. My parents stay at home all day and they interfere in everything”. (Female,16 years old).

“My parents told that I would get fat if I keep staying front of computer like that. My father forced me to do physical activities with him every morning. But I don't like to do that, he can do it with my little brother. I know that he wants to take me in more common activities and take me closer to him, but it's not a proper way. I feel a little unpleasant”. (Female, 16 years old).

“My parents dont like me to eat the breakfast late, they want me to have breakfast, have lunch and have diner with them. I have my own life, but now, I have to life their lives. I dont think time spent together like that is good for our relationship. I feel tired, and I think that my parents is tired too”. (Male, 17 years old).

In-depth interviews show that the relationship between adolescents and their parents have been influenced by the social distancing. The positive aspect is that parents and children have a chance to spend more time together and they engage in more common activities. But the negative aspect is that in some famillies, parent-adolescent conflict occur more frequently and more difficulties in communication come out.

4. Conclusion

There might be various factors affecting the communication between parents and adolescents. This qualitative study on urban high-school students found that gender, Internet use behaviors, generation gap and social distancing played an important role in the communication between adolescents and their parents,

and the associations between these factor and the parent-adolescent communication may take place in both direct or indirect way. Firstly, adolescents communicate with mother more than with father, and adolescent girls engage in conversation more actively than adolescent boys. Internet use can be considered as one factor which hinders the communication and make adolescents spend more time on online activities but less time on parental talk. Moreover, the generation gap, which is boosted by increased time on Internet, creates strong barrier to the mutual understand between parents and adolescents. And in the lockdown days, that parents and adolescents spend all day together can make their relationship more closed but also make more domestic conflicts. It is worth to note that our findings are based on the view of adolescents only. It needs further research to examine deeper into the communication between parents and their adolescent children in urban family nowadays, especially from the view of parents.

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