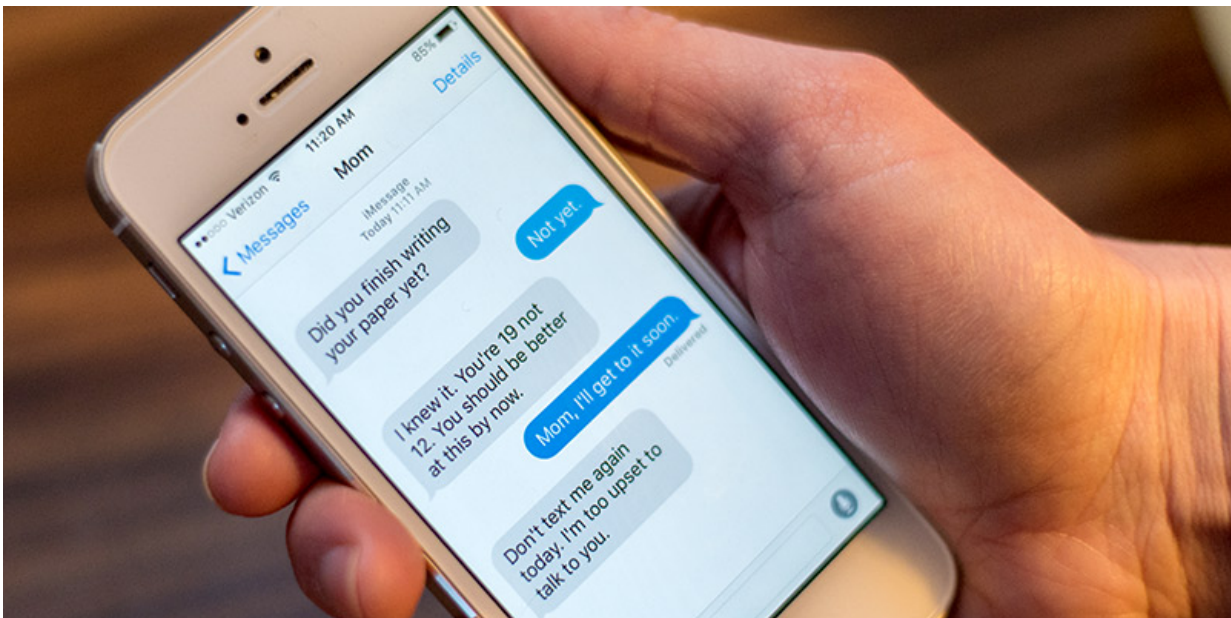


# The consequences of controlling parenting on college students

January 21 2016, by Carolyn Shapiro

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Texting and social media give controlling parents more access to their college-aged kids than ever. A new UVM study indicates that this manipulation affects students' friendships. Credit: Joshua Brown

College students whose parents lay on the guilt or try to manipulate them may translate feelings of stress into similar mean behavior with their own friends, a new study by a University of Vermont psychologist has found.

Those students' [physical response](#) to stress influences the way they will carry out that hostility – either immediately and impulsively or in a cold, calculated way, concluded Jamie Abaied, a UVM assistant professor of psychological science.

Building on her previous research on the effects of various parenting styles on college-age children, Abaied looked at the link between "parental psychological control" and the young adults' relationships with peers. Her study, published by the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, involved 180 mostly female [college students](#) and was a collaboration with Abaied's graduate research assistant, Caitlin Wagner, the lead author on the paper.

Even after they leave home as legal adults, college students often still depend on parents for financial, as well as emotional, support. Some parents will nit-pick and find fault or threaten to withdraw affection (or money) as punishment or to force a desired outcome. With today's technology, parents can exercise that control wherever their kids go – with texts, email and social media keeping them in constant contact.

"You can do that from far away," Abaied says. "You don't have to be in person to manipulate your kids' thoughts and emotions."

The result can stunt their budding independence, Abaied concluded. "We need to be really mindful of how influential the parents are."

College students are less studied in relation to [parental control](#), Abaied says, though psychologists have long recognized that heavy-handed parents trigger "relational aggression" in their children. Relational aggression involves a relationship with a friend or loved one and actions that harm feelings or damage social status: exclusion from a social event, rumor-mongering, backstabbing or public embarrassment.

With younger children, one might not invite another to a birthday party. Adolescents might try to embarrass or ostracize a peer, as in the "Mean Girls" movie about a high-school outsider who infiltrates then obliterates a popular female clique.

Abaied's study is unique in that it factored physiology, specifically the physical response to stress, in the way the student carries out [relational aggression](#). In her UVM lab, Abaied and her researchers attached sensors to the students' fingers to measure miniscule changes in sweat. Perspiration indicates the ramping up of the sympathetic nervous system – along with an elevated heart rate and increased oxygen flow – as the body's adaptation to perceived stress, also known as the "fight or flight" response.

In carefully crafted interviews, researchers asked the students to describe a painful event involving a close person, perhaps an argument with a roommate or a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and recorded their sweat levels. "Basically, we were trying to get them to relive" the difficult experience, Abaied says, "just to get their bodies to demonstrate their stress response to us."

Those who perspired more, indicating "high arousal," got more upset. They were more hot-tempered and likely to react quickly with less thought – the types who hit the "send" button on a nasty email right away.

Those who sweated less, with "blunted arousal," stayed cool and collected and were more likely to think through an aggressive response. "If you're calm, you can be strategic and planned in your aggression," Abaied says. "You can really use your aggression to control your relationship and stay dominant over your peers."

To determine the level of parental control, the students completed a

questionnaire. Higher control correlated with higher aggression. Less-controlling parents created less aggression, Abaied says.

"It seems like good parenting protects them," she says of college [students](#). "Good parenting prevents them from being aggressive in their peer relationships."

**More information:** Caitlin R. Wagner et al. Skin Conductance Level Reactivity Moderates the Association Between Parental Psychological Control and Relational Aggression in Emerging Adulthood, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-016-0422-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0422-5)

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