

Teens need frequent communication with parents to maintain youth resiliency after a divorce, study says

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Texting, FaceTime and other popular communication methods among teens may help build supportive parent-youth relationships after a divorce, according to a Kansas State University family studies researcher.

Mindy Markham, associate professor and associate director for Kansas State University's School of Family Studies and Human Services;

Jonathon Beckmeyer at Indiana University; and Jessica Troilo at West Virginia University recently published a study about parent-youth relationships after a divorce in the *Journal of Family Issues*.

The researchers evaluated data from nearly 400 divorced mothers and fathers with a child between 10-18 years old. They identified three types of post-divorce co-parenting relationships—cooperative, moderately engaged and conflictual—and evaluated differences in three key aspects of youth well-being as well as the frequency of communication.

"Parental warmth and closeness, [parents'](#) knowledge about their kids and inconsistent discipline didn't differ among three different types of divorced co-parenting relationships," Markham said. "What did make a difference was the contact that the parents had with the youth. Essentially, the more contact that parents had with their kids was better regardless of the parents' relationship with each other."

These findings are contrary to a similar 2008 study, which suggested that divorced co-parenting individuals should be cooperative to maintain children's resiliency to divorce. It also is contrary to the Family Systems Theory—that the quality of a post-divorce relationship spills over to parent-child relationships. According to Markham, these conflicting results may be because [older children](#) are more likely to have a cellphone or tablet today and can take a more active role in the parent-child relationship.

"Preteens and teenagers probably have their own devices and are able to text, email or video chat with their nonresidential parent so the child can take more ownership of the relationship," Markham said. "I think frequent communication, whether it is in person or using communication technology, is really critical to making sure that the parent-child contact stays in place."

According to Markham, youth with parents who are warm and supportive have been found to engage in fewer problem behaviors and experience less emotional distress. Also, parents who have great knowledge of their youth's daily lives can respond well to their children's needs and create environments that promote positive youth development. Inconsistent discipline, on the other hand, can lead to youth anxiety, aggression, or threaten a child's sense of security. These three aspects together are critical for youth well-being and may help promote resiliency in youth experiencing parental divorce.

"Parents in a conflictual or disengaged co-parenting relationship with their former spouse who were able to communicate with their child daily or weekly had higher levels of parental knowledge, which makes sense, Markham said. "Parental warmth and support also were higher among parents who had more frequent contact with their child."

This finding may help divorce education programs refocus on individual parenting skills to strengthen parent-[youth](#) relationships instead of stressing cooperative parenting if they do not get along, Markham said. If a child is old enough to have their own device, parents should be able to communicate directly and compartmentalize a stressful relationship with an ex-spouse so it does not negatively affect the parent-child relationship.

"If it is possible for parents to cooperate, obviously that would be ideal, but there are situations where they can't and I think this research is saying you can still have a good parent-child relationship even if the [relationship](#) with your ex can't work," Markham said.

More information: Jonathon J. Beckmeyer et al. Postdivorce Coparenting Relationships and Parent–Youth Relationships: Are Repartnership and Parent–Youth Contact Moderators?, *Journal of Family Issues* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X18821395](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18821395)

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