

Parent-teen conflicts less troublesome when teens feel loved, study shows

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A new study from the Yale Child Study Center finds that parents can lessen the effects of inevitable conflict with their teenage children by showing emotional warmth, and that this can make a difference within

the course of a day.

Published in the journal *Emotion*, "When Do Adolescents Feel Loved?" is the first study of its kind to examine fluctuations in how loved teens feel at a daily level.

Using three weeks of daily diary entries submitted by parents and teens, the investigators—John Coffey (Yale University and Sewanee: The University of the South), Mengya Xia (University of Alabama), and Greg Fosco (Pennsylvania State University)—were able to link parents' displays of warmth and parents' perceptions of conflict to daily fluctuations in how loved their teens were feeling.

"By using 21 consecutive days of daily diaries, we were able to disentangle the day-to-day ways that parents' behaviors are linked to how loved their teenagers were feeling," said Coffey, the study's lead author and the Arnold Gesell Visiting Assistant Professor at the Yale Child Study Center. "The daily methodology is uniquely suited to providing caregivers with practical suggestions for daily life."

Irrespective of the general closeness of the parent-teen relationships, researchers found that teens reported feeling more loved on days when parents reported showing more warmth in the form of affection, understanding, and praise. Likewise, teens reported feeling less loved on days when parents reported more conflict than usual.

More importantly, the researchers said, they also found that parents can mitigate the impact of conflict by showing their teen warmth. In other words, on days when parents were warm, high levels of conflict didn't reduce how loved teens felt.

To mitigate conflict, warmth had to be conveyed on the same day—but the warmth and conflict did not need to be related, the researchers

found.

"Parents often stress about the conflicts they are experiencing with their children," said Coffey, "but our study suggests conflicts are manageable as long as children experience warmth from their parents at some point during the same day."

To reach these conclusions, the researchers collected nightly surveys self-reported by one teen and one parent from 151 different families. Participating teens were in the 9th and 10th grades, and ranged in age from 13 to 16 years old. Slightly more female teens participated, and the vast majority (95%) of participating parents were female.

Parents and teens also filled out initial baseline surveys about how close they were in general. The researchers used their answers to examine whether general closeness moderated daily fluctuations in parent-reported warmth and conflict, and teen-reported love.

Teens who reported feeling generally closer to their parents did on average feel more loved. "But even if they felt close to their parents," said Coffey, "daily parent-reported conflict and warmth still predicted how much love a [teen](#) felt that day."

The study adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting daily fluctuations in feeling loved are common even in long-term relationships. How parents and teens communicate and resolve [conflict](#) may be most important to maintaining a healthy relationship long-term, said the researchers.

Avoiding conflicts can often have more negative effects, they added.

"The study findings are particularly useful right now," added Coffey, "because [parents](#) and their children are spending so much more time

together, often with restricted space and under additional stress. Finding ways to be kind and warm will help mitigate potential conflicts and ensure children feel loved."

More information: John K. Coffey et al. When do adolescents feel loved? A daily within-person study of parent–adolescent relations., *Emotion* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000767](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000767)

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