

Does it matter if your kids listen to you?

When adolescents reject mom's advice, it still helps them cope

May 23 2024, by Marianne Stein



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Parents are often eager to give their adolescent children advice about school problems, but they may find that youth are less than receptive to their words of wisdom. However, kids who don't seem to listen to their parents may still benefit from their input, a new study from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign shows.

The researchers looked at conversations between fifth-grade students and their mothers about [academic problems](#), identifying mom's advice strategies and the [youth](#)'s response. Then they correlated these findings with how the child coped after the transition to middle school the following year—often a difficult time with new peers and academic demands.

The [paper](#), "Academic challenges during early adolescence: Mothers' advice and youth responses to advice," is published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

"We wanted to understand what's happening in actual conversations between parents and children. We focused on academic challenges such as difficulty understanding schoolwork, being bored in class, or problems with time management because academic expectations and pressure start to increase during this age.

"We wanted to know what parents are telling their kids about how to manage these stressors and how the kids are responding," said lead author Kelly Tu, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at Illinois.

The study included a racially diverse community sample of 100 youth and their mothers. The pairs were asked to spend five minutes discussing an academic problem the child had recently experienced. The youth and their teachers completed a survey that addressed youth coping and

school engagement. After the child started middle school the following year, the youth and one of their teachers again completed surveys.

The researchers found that mothers encouraged their children to deal with academic challenges in an active way. The three most common advice types were [cognitive reappraisal](#) (suggesting ways to reframe the problem, considering other explanations, thinking about experiences as learning opportunities), strategizing (encouraging youth to look for solutions), and help-seeking (finding someone who can help, such as a teacher, parent, or older sibling).

"We did not find that parents told their kids to ignore the problem and not worry about it, as we sometimes see with peer problems. With academics, and especially around the transition to middle school, parents wanted their kids to try and address the challenges," Tu said.

Children's responses ranged from agreeing and accepting to rejecting and dismissing mothers' suggestions, but most were somewhere in the middle. Many youths reacted to their mothers advice with ambiguous statements such as "maybe" or "I don't know."

Tu said this might reflect the nature of a conversation, where youth need more information or some time to think things through, but it could also reflect the developmental period where adolescent children don't necessarily want their mothers to weigh in on their problems.

Overall, the researchers found that youth whose mothers provided cognitive reappraisal solutions had more adaptive coping, whereas those who received more strategizing and help-seeking solutions did not. These are typically considered adaptive coping strategies, so this finding was surprising, Tu said.

Taking into account the effect of children's responses, there were also

some unexpected results. Children who rejected or responded ambiguously to their mother's cognitive reappraisal advice actually reported more adaptive coping in middle school than those who accepted it.

"The kids are at an age where they're maturing and wanting to make their own decisions. Their immediate response may be resistance or reluctance, but the advice about how to reframe the problem, consider other explanations, or think about what they are learning from the experience, is sticking with them.

"They may need time to process and evaluate it. Maybe they didn't find it useful in that specific situation they were discussing. But perhaps they came across new experiences in middle school and now they have some strategies to pull from their toolbox because mom gave them different ways to think about academic challenges," Tu explained.

Furthermore, youth who accepted their mother's help-seeking advice reported less adaptive coping in [middle school](#) than those who rejected it.

"The help-seeking advice we saw in these conversations was more straightforward, 'Ask your teacher for help,' and not as complex and nuanced as the cognitive reappraisal suggestions, and it may not be enough to address ongoing and/or complex academic challenges. If this is the only advice that kids are given, these kids may not be developing the skills to help themselves and might come to rely more on others," Tu said.

She also points out that it's possible some youth who readily agree with mom may simply want to appease their parent and move on from the conversation, without really processing the advice.

"One of the main takeaways from this study is the importance of providing kids with a wide range of suggestions they can apply in different situations, especially when youth are dealing with academic challenges. Even if they don't seem to be receptive in the moment, we are finding that some advice still has longer-term benefits," she concluded.

The researchers chose to focus on mother-child dyads because mothers often are the primary caregiver who spends more time with youth and are more involved with day-to-day activities. But it would be important in future studies to also include the role of fathers, or have children identify which parent they usually go to for [advice](#), they said.

More information: Kelly M. Tu et al, Academic challenges during early adolescence: Mothers' advice and youth responses to advice, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appdev.2024.101648](#)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Does it matter if your kids listen to you? When adolescents reject mom's advice, it still helps them cope (2024, May 23) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-kids-adolescents-mom-advice-cope.html>

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