



# Adolescents function better when their deployed parents are supportive from afar



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**D**o you believe that long distance communication between deployed parents and their adolescents might help adolescents' functioning? We took a first small step toward finding out if this is the case. We studied the quantity and quality of such communication and their association with how well adolescents are doing when their parents are deployed.

We asked 75 sons and daughters ages 11-18 of deployed parents about the frequency and duration of communicating by phone, email, social media, text, video chat, photo sharing, and letters. We also asked them about the positive and controlling quality communication when parents and adolescents were on the phone or were video chatting. For example, we asked *"How often did your parent ask you about what was happening in school?"* *"How often did your parent tell you he/she can't wait to see you again?"* *"How often did your parent tell you that you need to try harder?"* We also asked the adolescents about their health and functioning (e.g., *"Have you felt fit and well?"* *"Have you felt lonely?"* *"Have you had fun with your friends?"*). We also asked them how they felt after the communication with the deployed parent was over.

We asked the at-home parents/

caregivers the same questions about the adolescents' functioning and feelings, and we added questions about internalizing and externalizing behaviour (e.g., *"Does he/she have sudden changes in moods?"* *"Is he/she cruel or mean to others?"* *"Is he/she disobedient at home?"*)

Our analyses of the information we collected revealed great variation in the quantity and quality of communications. On the average, the adolescents communicated with their deployed parents over 10 times a week with an average duration of 9.6 minutes per instance of communication. The analyses also revealed great variation in the quality of communication. On average, adolescents reported that they had positive communication most of the time, and they experienced controlling communication just sometimes.

Surprisingly, we found that the quantity of communication was not

associated with the adolescents' functioning, but that the quality of communication was linked to the adolescents' functioning. More specifically, we found that positive communication was related to (i) better adolescents' functioning and to (ii) more positive and negative emotions following communication. We also found that controlling communication was associated with worse adolescent functioning. We concluded that adolescents function better when their deployed parents are supportive from afar but did not prove that positive communication leads to or is the cause of better functioning. To prove such causality, we would have needed to rule out the possibility that better adolescents' functioning leads to parents' being more positive when communicating with their adolescents. We expect that future research that tracks adolescents functioning and parent-adolescent communication from pre deployment through deployment and reintegration will establish how adolescent functioning and the quality of deployed parent communication influence each other.

Friedman SL, Sigelman CK, Rohrbeck CA, del Rio-Gonzalez AM, Quantity and quality of communication during parental deployment: links to adolescents' functioning, Applied Developmental Science

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888691.2016.1207536>

Artwork by Hailey, Grade 11 • Bayside High School, Virginia Beach, VA • Civilian