A Friend Request from Dear Old Dad:
Associations Between Parent–Child Social Networking and Adolescent Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between parent–child social networking, connection, and outcomes for adolescents. Participants (491 adolescents and their parents) completed a number of questionnaires on social networking use, feelings of connection, and behavioral outcomes. Social networking with parents was associated with increased connection between parents and adolescents. Feelings of connection then mediated the relationship between social networking with parents and behavioral outcomes, including higher prosocial behavior and lower relational aggression and internalizing behavior. Conversely, adolescent social networking use without parents was associated with negative outcomes, such as increased relational aggression, internalizing behaviors, delinquency, and decreased feelings of connection. These results indicate that although high levels of social networking use may be problematic for some individuals, social networking with parents may potentially strengthen parent–child relationships and then lead to positive outcomes for adolescents.

Happy birthday sweetie! Can I put that on [Facebook] without embarrassing you?

—from www.myparentsjoinedfacebook.com

Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook have become increasingly popular and predominant in the United States and around the world. For example, Facebook reported almost a billion accounts in the summer of 2012,1 while Twitter has nearly 500 million users.2 While many adults and college students use social networking sites, use among adolescents has rapidly increased over the last few years, with approximately 80% of all teenagers having a profile on at least one social networking site.3

Although few would argue the pervasiveness of social networking sites, the effects of using such sites is less clear. Some have found that using social networking sites tends to be associated with positive outcomes, such as strengthening friendships and increased well-being.4–6 However, other studies indicate that high levels of social networking can be problematic and even addictive, with a number of studies finding high use to be associated with depression,7,8 loneliness,9 alcohol use,10 and delinquent behaviors.11

Almost all research on social networking sites has examined the influence of use on individuals, or on friendships and/or romantic relationships. However, many adolescents report using social networking sites with their parents. According to research by Facebook, adolescents are slightly more likely to “friend” their parents than the reverse, and much of the communication is positive.12 However, to our knowledge, little research has examined outcomes of social networking between adolescents and parents. Some research would suggest that it could potentially result in negative outcomes. For example, Gentzler et al. found that college students reported more loneliness, more anxious attachment, and conflict in the parent–child relationship compared to those who did not use social networking sites with their parents.13 Indeed, some adolescents report that they feel their parents are breaching their privacy when asking to become a friend on a social networking site,14 and several adolescents specifically report that Facebook is for interacting with their friends and not their parents.5

However, other research would suggest that such interaction over social networking sites could be positive for a number of reasons. For example, parents are able to monitor their children’s activity and relationships when connected online.15 Parental monitoring is generally related to positive adolescent outcomes,16 and social networking provides a unique window for parents to monitor their children’s behavior.17
Social networking between adolescents and parents could also promote feelings of connection. Indeed, users of social network sites say the primary motivation for using sites is to increase connection with family members, including children.\textsuperscript{18} Family systems theory\textsuperscript{19} provides a useful framework to understand how using social networking sites together as a family might result in positive outcomes for adolescents. This theory states that media can be an integral part of family life, where parents and children interact together, form traditions, communicate, and strengthen family bonds. However, little research has examined whether using newer forms of media, such as social networking sites, can also increase connectivity. Indeed, certain forms of new media seem to lend themselves particularly well to increased connectivity, while traditional forms of media tend to be focused on entertainment. Accordingly, the current study examines the associations between parent–child use of social networking sites and feelings of connection and other adolescent outcomes. Given that parent–child connection tends to be associated with positive outcomes in adolescents,\textsuperscript{20,21} we predict that heightened use of social networking sites between parents and adolescents will be associated with increased feelings of connection, which would then lead to positive adolescent outcomes, including decreased aggression, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and increased prosocial behavior toward family.

\textbf{Method}

\textit{Participants}

The participants for this study were taken from Wave 4 (data gathered in 2010) of a larger study. The study is of family life, and the current sample involved families with a child between the ages of 12 and 17 years ($M\text{\,\,age}=14.40$, $SD=1.07$; 53% female). Participants were randomly selected from a large Northwestern city in the United States. Participants were 491 families (child, mother, and father when available, all co-residential) who were selected from the larger sample because the adolescents reported using social networking sites. Regarding ethnicity, 72% of families were European American, 8% were African American, and 20% were multi-ethnic. Average annual income was approximately $60,000 per year, but ranged from less than $20,000 a year (10% of sample) to more than $100,000 per year (12% of the sample).

\textit{Procedure}

Participant families were randomly selected from a national database and were contacted directly using a multi-stage recruitment protocol. Of all eligible families (those with an adolescent between the ages of 11 and 14 years at Time1), the overall response rate was 61%. At each wave of data collection, interviewers visited the family’s home and conducted an assessment interview that included videotaped interactions (not used in current study), as well as questionnaires that were completed in the home.

\textbf{Measures}

\textit{Social networking and media use.} To assess overall use of social networking sites, adolescents responded to one item on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 = “none” to 9 = “more than 8 hours,” asking “How much time do you spend on social networking sites in a typical day?” To assess social networking with family, adolescents, mothers, and fathers responded to one item asking how they used media or technology to connect with one another—“How often do you use social networking sites (such as Facebook) to connect with your parent/child?”—on a scale ranging from 1 = “never” to 6 = “more than once a day.” In order to represent family interactions more accurately rather than the perceptions of one individual,\textsuperscript{22} a latent variable was created using adolescent (factor loading = 0.80), mother (factor loading = 0.43), and father report (factor loading = 0.44) to represent use of social networking sites with family.

In order to isolate time spent on social networking from other types of media use, overall adolescent media use was used as a control variable in the current study, and adolescents responded to four items on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 = “none” to 9 = “more than 8 hours,” asking how much time in a typical day they spent watching TV, using video games, using the Internet, or listening to music. These items were averaged ($r=0.20–0.44$) to represent overall adolescent media use.

\textit{Parent–child connection.} Adolescents reported on parent–child connection using the warmth/support subscale (five items) of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire—Short Version (PSDQ).\textsuperscript{23} Sample items include, “My parent is responsive to my feelings and needs” and “My parent and I have warm and loving times together.” Responses range on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = “never” to 5 = “always,” with higher scores indicating higher levels of adolescent reports of maternal ($z=0.84$, $M=3.78$, $SD=0.82$) and paternal ($z=0.84$, $M=3.57$, $SD=0.87$) connection. A latent variable was created using adolescents’ report of maternal (factor loading = 0.90) and paternal (factor loading = 0.79) connection to represent overall parent–child connection.

\textit{Internalizing and delinquency.} Internalizing behaviors and delinquency were measured with items assessing depression/anxiety (13 items) and delinquency (9 items), which have shown adequate validity and reliability in adolescent samples.\textsuperscript{24} Sample items for internalizing include, “I am unhappy, sad, or depressed”; and for delinquency, “I lie or cheat.” Adolescents were the only reporters of their own internalizing behavior ($z=0.84$), but adolescents ($z=0.77$, factor loading = 0.86), mothers ($z=0.77$, factor loading = 0.60), and fathers ($z=0.66$, factor loading = 0.66) answered the delinquency items in regard to the adolescents’ behavior on a scale ranging from 0 = “not true” to 2 = “very true or often true.” Mean scale scores from all three respondents were used to create a latent variable representing adolescent delinquency.

\textit{Relational aggression.} Adolescents’ relational aggression was assessed using four items ($z=0.71$).\textsuperscript{25} Adolescents reported on their own behavior on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “never true” to 5 = “almost always true.” A sample item includes, “When I have been angry at someone, I have tried to damage that person’s reputation by gossiping about them.”

\textit{Prosocial behavior.} Adolescents’ prosocial behavior toward family was measured using a modified version of the Kindness and Generosity subscale of the Values in Action
Inventory of Strengths.26 The current study adapted items to target prosocial behavior toward family members (nine items, e.g., “I really enjoy doing small favors for my family”) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “not like me/my child at all” to 5 = “very much like me/my child.” Mean scale scores of adolescent (a = 0.85, factor loading = 0.89), mother (a = 0.91, factor loading = 0.51), and father (a = 0.90, factor loading = 0.45) reports were used to create a latent variable representing adolescents’ prosocial behavior toward family.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

$t$ Tests were conducted to determine gender differences on all four social networking variables, and revealed that females (M = 3.86, SD = 1.72) reported higher overall levels of social networking than did males (M = 3.48, SD = 1.58; t(479) = 2.49, p < 0.05). Table 1 includes descriptive statistics and correlations between social networking and all other study variables. It should be noted that social networking between child and parent does occur but on a relatively rare basis. Indeed, only about 50% of adolescents in the current study reported networking with their parents, with most reporting only occasional use. However, 19% of adolescents reported social networking with parents multiple times per month, and 16% reported using such sites with their parents every day.

Social networking as a predictor of parent–child connection and adolescent behavior

Latent variables were created for family social networking, parent–child connection, prosocial behavior, and delinquency. A measurement model was examined using structural equation modeling via AMOS27 and revealed adequate model fit (χ²(21) = 123.39, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05). Latent variable invariance using multigroup models was tested as a function of child gender and revealed that there was no decrease in model fit when intercepts, factor loadings, and residual variances were constrained to be equal, so a single group model was maintained.

Next, a structural model was estimated modeling family social networking as a predictor of parent–child connection. In turn, parent–child connection was a predictor of adolescents’ relational aggression, internalizing problems, prosocial behavior, and delinquency (see Figure 1). Multigroup models were again conducted to test for structural invariance as a function of child gender, and revealed no decrease in model fit when structural paths were constrained to be equal, so the model was run as a single group. Adolescents’ overall social networking, overall media use, age, and gender were used as control variables, but were not shown in the figure for parsimony. This final model yielded acceptable fit (χ²(77) = 144.36, p < 0.001; TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.04).

Results suggested that family social networking was positively associated with parent–child connection and negatively associated with adolescent delinquency. In turn, parent–child connection was negatively associated with adolescents’ relational aggression, internalizing problems, and delinquency, and positively associated with prosocial behavior toward family (see Figure 1). In terms of controls, adolescents’ overall social networking was negatively associated with parent–child connection (β = -0.12, p = 0.04), and positively associated with adolescents’ relational aggression (β = 0.15, p = 0.002), internalizing problems (β = 0.14, p = 0.004), and delinquency (β = 0.21, p < 0.001). Adolescents’ overall media use was negatively associated with parent–child connection (β = -0.12, p = 0.04), and positively associated with adolescents’ internalizing problems (β = 0.10, p = 0.04). Adolescent gender (males had the higher coded value) was negatively associated with prosocial behavior (β = -0.15, p < 0.001) and internalizing problems (β = -0.24, p < 0.001). Adolescent age was positively associated with adolescents’ delinquency (β = 0.10, p = 0.04) and prosocial behavior (β = 0.14, p < 0.001).

To examine the indirect effects through parent–child connection, we conducted bootstrapping analyses for indirect effects based on 2,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% CI. The bootstrapping analysis revealed significant indirect effects between family social networking and prosocial behavior toward family (p < 0.05), relational aggression (p < 0.05), and

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Note. SN, social networking; MR, mother report; FR, father report; CR, child report. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.
a marginally significant indirect effect between family social networking and internalizing problems (\( p = 0.053 \)). The indirect effect between family social networking and delinquency was not statistically significant (\( p = 0.14 \)).

**Discussion**

The current study examined associations between parent–child social networking and adolescent outcomes. First, we found a large range of social networking use between parents and adolescents. While about half of adolescents who are on social network sites do connect with their parents over such sites, the frequency of connection is relatively rare, with less than 20% reporting daily interaction with parents. Despite the lack of frequent use between parents and teens, these findings confirm research that reveals that a large proportion of adolescent social network users are using such sites with their parents.12,15

We also found that joint use of social networking sites was associated with heightened connectivity between adolescents and parents, especially when examined in the overall model. According to family systems theory,19,28 media use can become part of family interactions and can strengthen family bonds in a variety of contexts. Parents and children can certainly use social networks for increased communication, but can use them in a multitude of other ways (e.g., playing games). Parents and adolescents can also show support to each other by making positive comments on pictures or status updates, which may add to feelings of connection. In addition, interacting through social networking sites may help parents understand their adolescent’s world better, as parents get a unique glimpse into their adolescent’s social group, school friends, and personal preferences. All this interaction can lead to heightened feelings of connectivity, which was associated with a number of positive outcomes for adolescents, such as higher prosocial behavior toward family and diminished relational aggression and internalizing problems.

Though social networking with parents was associated with heightened connectivity, we should note that social networking is not the only activity, nor is it likely the most important activity, that parents and adolescents engage in to promote feelings of connectivity. Indeed, there are a host of other experiences that parents and adolescents can engage in to strengthen feelings of connection.79–33 Social networking should perhaps be viewed as one of many “tools” that parents can use to feel close to their child and to interact in meaningful ways.

Conversely, a high level of social networking not with a parent was associated with negative outcomes for adolescents. Specifically, it was related with increased delinquency, relational aggression, and decreased parent–child connection. This supports a number of studies that show that high levels of social networking can be associated with negative outcomes.7,9,10 Though other studies have shown the link with delinquency11 and internalizing problems,7 to our knowledge this is the first study to show associations with relational aggression and connection with parents. It is possible that some adolescents use social networking sites to meet and associate with delinquent peers their parents may not approve of, increasing the likelihood of general delinquent and aggressive behavior. When parents are also on social networking sites, they may be more aware of such associations and may be able to monitor adolescent behavior better and talk with them about potential issues. Adolescents may also use social networking sites as a vehicle of harm, for example by sending mean messages, “de-friending” others, posting unflattering pictures, or creating online groups for the purpose of excluding or humiliating others. All these behaviors are types of relational aggression enacted in a virtual format,34 and these types of behaviors might be more likely to occur when parents do not have a presence on an adolescent’s social networking site. Finally, adolescents may use social networking sites as a way to isolate or ignore their parents. They may spend copious amounts of time on such sites and deign to participate in family activities and discussions.

Though the current study benefited from a large sample size and multiple informants, the study is not without limitations. Most importantly, the study is cross-sectional, and causal statements cannot be made. Though it is possible that
joint social networking use may result in heightened connection, future research should test the possibility that connection may result in increased social networking between adolescents and parents. There are a few other limitations of the study, specifically that we only asked one question regarding social networking use; we did not ask the degree to which parents used social networking sites in general, and we did not ask detailed questions regarding why or why not families used social networking sites. Certainly, future research could expand upon these topics.

Despite these limitations, the current research is the first to show positive associations and outcomes for adolescents who use social networking sites with their parents. Though we would not suggest that every parent immediately “friend request” their teenagers, this study shows that social networking can certainly be a useful tool in the arsenal of strategies that parents use to connect with their adolescent. Since we did find that high levels of social networking without parents were associated with negative outcomes for adolescents, we would hope that parents would consider talking with their adolescent about interacting over social networking sites. We feel this discussion will be paramount, of parenting practices as predictors of aggression in a middle school sample. Journal of School Violence 2010; 34:141–155.


21. Padilla-Walker LM, Christensen KJ. Empathy and self-regulation as mediators between parenting and adolescents’

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