

# The Adolescent Telephone Years

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While almost no published research has been completed on adolescent telephone use, it has been found that adolescents report their telephone use to be an area of conflict with their parents. Data from 160 adolescents aged 14 years and some (88) of their parents showed that girls had twice the telephone use and more parent-adolescent conflict than boys. Boys and parents of both boys and girls reported that telephone use was strongly related to conflict, but girls did not. Boys' telephone use was also correlated with independence the boys wanted, but such was not true for girls. High adolescent telephone use was related to the control a parent wanted over the telephone. It appears that parents control male, but not female, telephone use and males wanted more independence over telephone use; whereas female adolescents seem already to have this independence.

Adolescence is often characterised by disagreements within the family that are associated with transitions to puberty. Conflict with parents increases during early adolescence, 11-14 years, remains relatively stable during middle adolescence, and decreases during late adolescence (Ellis-Schwabe & Thornburg, 1986; Small, Eastman & Cornelius, 1988). Parents perceive higher levels of conflict than do their offspring (Galambos & Almeida, 1992; but see Smetana, 1989), about once every three days on average. Females are involved in 70% more conflict with their parents than are their male counterparts (Montemayor, 1990).

A review of the current literature found that there had been no research on the use of the telephone by adolescents; only two studies briefly looked at telephone use when investigating parent-adolescent conflict. Here, telephone use was reported to be a high area of conflict for both males

and females, but consistently higher in females (Ellis-Schwabe & Thornburg, 1986; Smetana, 1989).

There has been some evidence in the literature to suggest that parent-adolescent conflict is a result of adolescent autonomy competing with parental authority and desire for control within the family (Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana, 1989). As independence is achieved, the peer group becomes increasingly important, while adolescent acceptance of parental control diminishes (Small, Eastman & Cornelius, 1988; Wilkinson & Chamove, 1992), creating disharmony within the family. Surprisingly, adolescents who experience more conflict do not spend less time with their families (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck & Duckett, 1996).

The current study expected to find that conflict over the use of the telephone would be associated with an adolescent wanting to gain independence (as demonstrated by their being on the telephone as long as they want), and a parent wanting to maintain control of adolescent behaviour (telephone time being only as long as a parent permits). When adolescent independence and parental control over the telephone converge, the mid-point of where the two constructs connect is called a conflux. Therefore a conflux occurs when the two converging forces (in this case, adolescent independence and parental control) combine and are in opposition in an attempt to obtain the same goal, with neither the adolescent nor parent willing to compromise.

## Method

### Participants

Of the 248 questionnaires returned, 83 of the adolescent participants were paired with their parents making a total of 166 subjects. Seventy-seven adolescents had parents who did not return forms; five parents returned forms with their adolescent not participating in the study. Seventy-eight of the adolescent subjects were adolescent females, 74 were adolescent males, eight not specifying their sex.

The measures included two questionnaire forms, one for adolescents and a similar one for parents. Due to time

constraints, no reliabilities were run on the scale; the straightforward nature of the questions argued that this would not be problematic. The research was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee. The 10-item questionnaires focused on adolescent telephone use (duration of use), parent-adolescent conflict over such use, adolescent independence and parental control. Most questions utilised a uni-dimensional 7-point Likert Scale (copies available from either author).

Principals from four local high schools selected potential participants from Form Three or Four students (first or second year of high school, aged 13-14). Adolescent participants were also supplied with a Parental Questionnaire Form, which they took home for one of their parents to complete. The return rate for parent and student questionnaire forms was 40%, and 75% respectively. Single instances of missing data appeared in only 14 records and these missing instances were ignored.

It was decided to convert the combination of adolescent independence and parental control into a single number termed a "conflux". As such a construct had not been developed before, the following calculations were performed: the adolescent independence and parental control scores were multiplied together to produce X; the smaller number of the two scores was divided by the larger number to produce Y; X was multiplied by Y to produce Z, which became the "conflux" measure. This conflux score was high when the two strong forces, adolescent independence and parental control, were competing and low when either or both forces were weak (details in Wild, 1998).

## Results

Both adolescents and parents estimated that girls spent 60% more time on the telephone than did their male counterparts

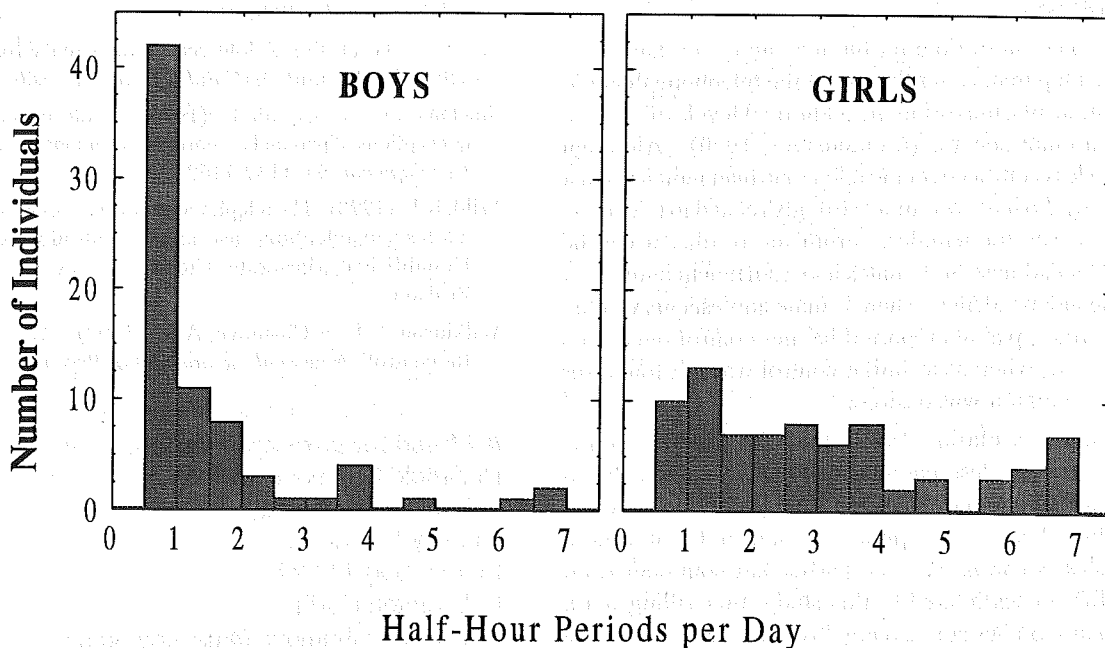
(illustrated in Figure 1). Female adolescents spent an average of 1 hour and 24 minutes (SD = 45 min.) on the telephone each day, while male adolescents spent only 51 minutes (SD = 30 min.) ( $t(77) = 4.06, p < .001$ ). Adolescents estimated weekend daily telephone use to be 18 minutes longer than weekday use,  $M_{\text{weekend}} = 84, SD = 60$  versus  $M_{\text{weekday}} = 66, SD = 66$  ( $t(157) = 6.00, p < .001$ ), but parents estimated this time as one-third (24 min.) longer,  $t(87) = 5.90, p < .001$ . Three girls reported that their longest telephone conversation of the month was over seven hours; in comparison for two males the longest telephone call made within the month lasted for a mere five hours.

Adolescents reported that conflict over the telephone was more frequent than reports by their parents,  $M_{\text{adolescent}} = 3.2/\text{week}, SD = 1.6$  versus  $M_{\text{parent}} = 2.8, SD = 1.5$  ( $t(82) = 2.54, p < .05$ ). A significant difference between females and males was found for the amount of conflict reported by adolescents,  $M_{\text{female}} = 3.5, SD = 1.7, M_{\text{male}} = 2.8, SD = 1.6$  ( $t(150) = 2.58, p < .05$ ). However, for parental reports, no reliable difference between the two sexes of adolescent was found for conflict with their parents,  $M_{\text{female}} = 3.0, M_{\text{male}} = 2.5$  ( $t(77) = 1.61, p > .05$ ). It should be noted that local calls in New Zealand are free.

Parental reports of adolescent telephone use were strongly related to parent-adolescent conflict for both girls ( $r(40) = +.62, p < .001$ ) and boys ( $r(39) = +.55, p < .001$ ). Similarly, a strong relationship was found between boys' perceptions of telephone use and conflict ( $r = +.49, p < .01, n = 39$ ). In contrast, girls reported a weak relationship between their telephone use and conflict ( $r = +.17, p > .05, n = 40$ ).

Only 20% of adolescents said they wanted more independence to use the telephone than they were allowed, and 34% of parents reported wanting more control than they

Figure 1: Mean daily time spent on the telephone by adolescent boys and girls in 30-minute segments.



had over their adolescent's telephone use. Although girls used the telephone for long periods, their telephone use was not related to the independence they wanted ( $r = +.07$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $n = 40$ ). While boys did not use the telephone as much as girls, the more they used it, the more they wanted independence ( $r = +.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 39$ ).

There was a strong relationship between telephone use, as measured by parental report of total duration of calls, and (a) the control a parent *wanted* over their son's telephone use ( $r = +.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $n = 39$ ) and (b) the control a parent *had* over their son's use of the phone ( $r = +.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For daughters the correlation between telephone use and (a) the control *wanted* by parents was high ( $r = +.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 40$ ), but it was weak for (b) the control a parent *had* over her use of the phone ( $r = +.26$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This relationship suggests that the more time adolescents spent on the telephone, the more parents *wanted* to control their offspring's use of the telephone.

After combining adolescent independence and parental control into a "conflux" measure, the strongest associations found were: For boys there was a strong relationship between conflict and the conflux of independence that they *wanted* and the control their parents *had*, both when the two measures were described by parents ( $r = +.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and when described by the boys ( $r = +.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ). For girls, parental reports showed that after combining the independence a girl *had* and the control a parent *wanted*, this measure correlated  $+0.62$  with conflict ( $p < .001$ ). However the girls themselves reported no relationship between conflict and the conflux of independence and control ( $r = +.04$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

These relationships suggest that in the case of boys, as the combination of the control a parent *has* and independence an adolescent *wants* increases, so too does parent-adolescent conflict. Therefore, the more control a parent *has*, the more independence an adolescent *wants* and, in turn, the more conflict experienced in the family.

## Discussion

Females spent more time on the telephone and had more conflict with parents over the use of the telephone than did male adolescents, mirroring the additional levels of conflict in girls in other spheres (Montemayor, 1990). Although males had less conflict over the telephone than females, what conflict they did have was more strongly related to telephone use than it was for females. From the results, it can be assumed that adolescent females had a sufficient amount of telephone independence, whereas male adolescents wanted more. Further, parents reported having control over male telephone use, whereas a similar control was not found for females although it was desired.

Smetana's claim (1989) that the aspiration for independence and less parental control is fundamental to adolescence, was supported by the strong relationship found in this study between telephone use and independence a male adolescent *wanted*. One participant commented on gender differences related to this study after filling out a questionnaire on her son, saying, "If I was referring to my 17 and a half-year-old daughter my answers would be very

different. I've *smashed* two phones! Three hours plus per day for two—three years!"

The current study failed to establish a relationship between telephone use and adolescent independence for females. The link to how girls are expressing their independence may be related to whom they are talking on the telephone. If girls are conversing with their peers, then telephone use could be a reflection of independence, in that females are relying more on peer influences than they are on their parents (Small, Eastman & Cornelius, 1988); this switch may be an indication of the cause of the increase in telephone use evident during these years. Also, if males are talking with females, the female penchant for long calls might be influencing and increasing male telephone use.

Throughout this study, there were differences between adolescent and parental reports. Girl's reports of conflict and independence were significantly different from that of their parent's but those of boys were not. On average and inexplicably, parents consistently reported stronger relationships between the concepts investigated within this study than did their offspring. Interestingly, reports made by male adolescents were more closely associated with parental reports than were those of their female counterparts. It seems telephone use mirrors the bonding of girls with their friends leading to conflict with parents but boys have other interests.

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