With a range of technology right at your fingertips it is easy and tempting to communicate with your college student several times a day. If you find that the nature of your communication focuses on checking up on your student or directing him or her in day-to-day decisions, consider resisting the urge. Too much contact can actually send the unintended message that you don’t trust your student or that you think he or she lacks the ability to navigate life. For some students, too much contact can also prolong natural feelings of homesickness and prevent the development of important supportive relationships with peers, professors and advisors at the college or university.

In my coaching practice, one parent shared that she couldn’t use her cell phone for an entire week and that during this time she realized the urge she felt to frequently text her son was more about what she needed than what he needed. She was always worried about the “what if” scenarios, though rarely did the worries of her imagination ever materialize. She discovered that when she and her son didn’t have the opportunity to connect several times during the day they had more substantial things to share when they did communicate. This same parent also realized that her son made some good decisions without her input, and had in fact gone first to his Resident Advisor with a challenging roommate issue. Another parent recounted that he called his daughter at about the same time on Mondays and Wednesdays, which happened to be right before a class in which she was struggling. He felt she was distant and tired every time he spoke with her and he began to formulate various ideas about why she seemed so unhappy at college. Later, after he had called the advising office to express his concern, she shared that it was just a really bad time for her to speak with him, but she felt like she had to answer his call so he wouldn’t worry about her. She was actually very happy at college.

There aren’t any hard and fast rules about communicating with your student, and obviously when your student is experiencing stressful or challenging situations you might find your student initiating the contact more often. As parents, we most commonly communicate with our student because we want to:

- offer support and guidance;
- allay a worry or fear that we or our student has;
- share information from home;
- know how he or she is doing;
- express a concern;
- celebrate a success;
- find something out;
- say “hello”.

With modern technology, conversations occur instantly and sometimes without forethought. It can be both interesting and beneficial to explore the content around which you most commonly communicate with your student. Consider these questions:
1. Are you contacting your student because of an emotional need that you have to check-in, or do you just want to say hello?

2. How many times have you contacted your student already today or this week and about what types of things? Students often feel like they have to respond to a parent, even if it interrupts what they are doing. Having a designated time to connect can lead to a more satisfying conversation.

3. What communication methods (phone, texting, e-mail, webcam) are going to be the best to convey what you desire to express? Sometimes it is important to see your student and/or to hear his or her voice as opposed to only passing snippets of content back and forth by text messaging.

4. Do you need to convey what you want to share right now, or might it wait to be included in a more substantial exchange? Just because we can communicate immediately doesn’t mean that we have to, or that it is in the best interest of our student to do so.

5. Do you know what frequency of communication your student seeks from you?

6. Do you know when your student prefers to be contacted?

7. Do you know what method of communication your student prefers when communicating with you?

8. Do you hear yourself saying “You really should...” more than helping your student to develop and articulate the options and next steps that exist? Taking time to answer some of these questions will likely pave the way for more satisfying and productive conversations during your student’s college experience, and you will likely gain a more accurate picture of how your student is doing than if your contact is mostly on-the-fly or reactive.

“The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.”
Joseph Priestly, 1733 -1804

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