

Virtually dependent

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[“Don’t pick up,”](#) by Terry Castle, might once have been called “Cut the apron strings, already.” In the June issue of the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), Castle explores what she views as an unhealthy attachment of parents to their college kids and vice versa, as made evident to her by their cellphone habits.

When Castle told a class of Stanford students that her own dorm had only one wall phone, thus reducing the number of calls one could make to parents, the room fell silent. Then she asked her students how often they were in touch with parents and the kids offered, “At least two or three times a day” and “My mother would worry if I didn’t call her every day.” One student admitted that she talks to her mother six, seven times a day. “We’re like best friends.”

Castle was stunned. “All we wanted to do was get away from our parents!” she sputtered. “We never called our parents!”

The exchange led Castle, a professor of English at Stanford, to plumb classic British and American fiction for references to parent/child relationships and then to announce, with a hint of triumph, that protagonists of many well-known novels are “orphans” and that, from Heathcliff to Ismael to Jane Eyre to Peter Pan to Harry Potter, children and young adults begin their adventures *on their own*, with parents well out of sight.

It's only when these characters are alone in front of a life challenge, whether it's love or hunger or Voldemort, that they act on their own agency and are empowered to respond to the challenge. Castle posits that this is still true, that it's only when we are separated from our parents—hopefully not as orphans but as independent adults—that we reach maturity and gain self-knowledge.

So what does this say about Castle's students, riveted as some of them are to a screen with a virtual parent on it?

If helicopter parenting has led to an interdependency of young adults and their parents, I for one am concerned. But I think that Castle may be overreacting to the cellphone habit in her passion for her literary orphans. Yes, there is such a thing as addiction to the cellphone thing, but I think most young people are learning—over time—how to a) resist being dominated by the phone and b) how to establish distance from parents.

For one thing, young adults choose when and whether to answer a cellphone call. Although this is a frustrating development for some of us parents, it's the new protocol. For another thing, a quick text from Mom or Dad may be an intrusion, but it's nothing compared to parents showing up on campus unexpectedly or staying too long.

I'm more interested in how these students and their parents do in face-to-face encounters as they mature in relationship together—and in whether face-to-face time becomes the priority it needs to be for both parties.

I say this as the parent of two young adults, and as someone who is fascinated by the changes in conversation and conversational style as we all age. Those conversations ebb and flow and evolve over time. In my daughter's college years, I received calls and emails, but the content was slim. I was lucky to get anything more than superficial reports of activities and studies.

But ten years later I welcome my daughter's advice, and I'm daunted by and grateful for how well she reads me. She'll ask for a cup of coffee, which means we will slow down for a few minutes and share something of our relationships, work or plans. There are, of course, things that she will not share, or not until she's good and ready. I consider it my job to occasionally try and tease information out of her, and we both know we're enjoying the dynamic.

It's the kind of relationship I wish for all parents and their offspring, especially when they've struggled and even suffered in the effort to build the relationship. Tech communications are an extra; one-on-one time reveals the true nature of the relationship. Text that kid a date for dinner.