

## Using social media to improve parent-child relationships?

My 6- and 4-year-old boys give me lots of fun despite the troubles that they make every day. The two of them differ in intellectual development, but both have become more eager to know “why”—when my wife and/or I ask them to do or not to do something. They have begun to use the cognitive capacity of attribution.

Psychologists define attribution as the process by which individuals explain the causes of behavior. Younger kids who haven’t got the attributional capacity developed well yet, so they are typically more “direct” in response to an action (or any stimuli in psychological terms) directed to them. If the parent doesn’t give the kid what s/he wants, s/he would just scream out right away without exercising attribution. Older kids can tolerate more rejections, partly because they attribute the parent’s action as a matter of doing “something right”.

Since attribution is an acquired capacity, it is imperative that parents provide good guidance to kids to foster their development of this capacity. That’s why parents should answer the “why question” diligently when kids ask. A solid knowledge base about children’s attributional capacity and what guidance parents should provide already exists in the psychological literature. For example, a group of Chinese researchers published a paper in *Psychological Reports* (Zhang et al. 2016) recently to elucidate the mechanisms through which children attribute parents’ actions. My colleagues and I thought the paper added very useful insights to the literature, so we wrote a response paper to congratulate the authors (Leung et al. 2016).

There, we also suggested a somewhat provocative idea: How about using social media to improve parent-child relationship in relation to attribution? Not much research has been done on this specific topic. We mostly discussed the research potential in the response paper. Here I’ll focus more on the paper’s applied aspect.

Let me first point out that social media do have potential negative effects on both parents and children. For kids, too much screen time with social media can affect their brain growth. Pediatricians agree that more than 2 hours of screen time a day is a big “no no” for kids. There’s no formal guideline for parents in this regard.

So, set a reasonable time limit for social media. Perhaps no more than 20 minutes a week for kids. Within a time limit, social media can be a fun, “get-together” activity for the family. Consider a loving mom (or dad) sits with the kid, and logs in to her Facebook account with the kid together. Mom (or dad) would explain to the kid what Facebook (or other social media) is all about, what good social media habits look like, and also good “social media manners”: Spend no more than 20 minutes a week, comment on friends’ social media contents only politely, be humble, among other things.

For older kids like teenagers, there may be more “advanced” social media usage. While the

attributional capacity is typically more developed for these kids, their thinking can sometimes get convoluted. That is, teenagers have more knowledge about people's intention, but they don't necessarily use it well during the attributional process. For instance, they could have interpreted a parent's or a friend's comment in a very negative—but mistaken—manner. Feeling embarrassed, these teenagers may restrain themselves from sharing inner thoughts, fears, and other emotions with parents openly. Parents may encourage teenagers to keep this in mind: When "hard-to-talk" matters arise, consider using social media to open up the conversation with mom or dad.

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## **Publication**

[Capturing Parent-Child Interactions With Social Media: Comment on Zhang et al. \(2015\).](#)

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