COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GENERATION X AND GENERATION JACKASS:
CREATING COMMUNICATION RULES FOR PARENTS AND TEENS

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Abstract

Technologically addicted teenagers are facing challenges not even imagined by those accepting the challenge of parenthood. Using Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect theory and the phenomenological approach of data gathering, teens and parents were asked about their experiences in communicating with each other. With regards to Gerry Philispen’s Theory of Speech Codes, the patterns of communication with teens and parents were considered. Communication technologies will continue to change at a lightning quick speeds; the importance of collaborative communication patterns continues to remain crucial to open and honest sharing of information between parents and teens.

The desire to discover how to create open lines of honest communication, mutual trust, and reliable shared meanings are the main purpose of this research. Using 150 high school students, and 50 parents and community members in an urban high school in Texas, focus groups and self-directed journals were used to gather information about the issues and attitudes deemed important to teens and parents.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Importance of the Study

In consideration of the proliferation of social media sites available to teenagers, the consequences of postings are severely limited and currently unenforceable. The anonymity afforded to teenagers is allowing them to be hateful and mean, digitally and publically, with no ramifications. Teenagers are not held personally responsible for the posts they are creating. Often, it is not until a situation becomes tragic in nature that the issue discussed. Parents need to recognize that times have changed; it is terrible to be told, “I know what it was like, I went to high school.” Nothing will shut down the lines of communication faster than not being felt like you were being taken seriously. The quick release of information, the anonymous nature of posting, and the sheer mass of people that can be contacted with a few keystrokes are the main force behind the expansion of the social media phenomenon. Ideally, teenagers need to be able to take concerns to parents and have those concerns considered seriously. Clearly victimization is on the rise. Teenagers are old enough to dish it out, and they may not be properly equipped to take it. Parents must remember that technology has not just changed a few things; it has changed everything.

Deborah Tannen (2006) encourages us to consider the often mean and hateful nature of the teenage girls worldwide. Prior to 2000, teenagers were not carrying cell phones to school and Facebook was still a distant creation. There are tips for parents to help their kids navigate the Internet, social media sites, and text messages, these tips often coming from research and not actual conversation between parents and teens. Open
lines of communication must exist before these tips can be explored with the teenagers
and parents and other adults.

There are many ways for parents to improve the family communication channels
with regard to bullying, social media, drug use, sexual health and dating. Though parents
did not experience high school with social media, “one of my suggestions for improved
relationships is a frank conversation with their mom or parent role model of choice, there
are good guidelines on this book for conversations” (Smith, 2005. p. 47). If teenagers
have a safe placed to explore their fears and successes they will be more likely to
consider adults an ally, not another enemy.

Effective parenting is closely linked with open lines of communication between
parents and children. Kids have to be able to go to parents, and have the parent listen with
empathy. It is true, we have all been in high school at one point, but we never went to
high school in the world of social media. Susan Scott wrote a book, *Fierce
Conversations*, in which she discusses having the conversation that might be tough to
have, to really be ready to listen both with your ears and your heart, and to make sure that
you are ready to hear the unexpected. “Fierce conversations are about moral courage,
clear requests, and taking action” (2002). Deborah Tannen (2006) also reminds parents
the importance of keeping up with technological communication. “New technologies
entail new ways of staying in touch, reinforcing closeness, and resolving conflicts. But
they also provide new ways of expressing anger, hurting feelings, and risking
misunderstandings” (Tannen, 2006. p. 86). Even if it is a quick email to check in, parents
still need to check in on their kids. With the advent of new technology, the culture is
changing as well. Teenagers are learning to put an entire conversation into 140
characters, and parents are still hoping for full explanation when they ask their teenager how their day was.

Statement of Purpose

This study will consider the changes in family communication due to the introduction of social media and the Internet. While parents experienced a time where the access to information may have been limited to the library, parents and friends, the options for teens is endless. Information is coming out faster than can be consumed, and teens are not growing up in the same world their parents did. Teens have more and more options for gathering information; not always accurate or even safe, the skills necessary for determining correct from false information are yet to be formed. Teens are scared to talk to parents about issues such as bullying due to fear of retribution, lack of adequate family time to foster necessary conversations, and idea that parents will never be able to identify with the struggle of the teens of today. In a time where the spread of information is out of control, parents must remain open and willing to talk to teens about anything, and everything they want to talk about and find important. Teens must keep in mind that though the challenges may not have been exactly the same, parents did struggle to find themselves, just as their kids are doing today.

Definitions of Terms Used

Family

According to thefreedictionary.com/family, family is defined as a fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children; two or more people who share goals and values, have long-term commitments to one another,
and reside usually in the same dwelling (2012). Families in 2012 are often a mixture of direct parents and other family members, Aunts, Uncles and Grandparents. Some teens find better advice from a family friend or professional source. For the purpose of this study family will be considered the parents or guardian and the teens who reside in their homes.

**Communication**

Julia Scherba de Valenzuela, Ph. D defines communication as “any act by which one person gives to or receives from another person information about that person’s needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states” (Scherba de Valenzuela, 1992, p.2). Communication can happen through a variety of channels, many parents and teens text message each other to make plans to get picked up from school, or to stay after school for an event.

**Family Communication**

Olsen and Barnes (2010) define family communication as “the act of making information, ideas, thoughts and feelings known among members of a family unit. Family communication can range from poor to very effective” (p. 47). Different families are comfortable with different levels of communication, some parents ask their teen how their day is going and they get a minute by minute explanation of the day, some parents get a simple grunt.
Organization of the Remaining Chapters

This study was conducted to explore the communication between teens and parents, the past experiences of the participants and the way those experiences shape their communication behaviors. A desire to create communication conduct rules for teens and parents to create a safe place for conversations was the basis for the research. The information in this thesis is presented in five separate chapters. The second chapter established the philosophical considerations of Carl Rogers and the theoretical considerations of Gerry Philipsen’s Theory of Speech Codes and Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Theory. The second chapter also includes a review of the literature including cultural codes people use in communication choices, teens and family communication, conversation styles, and topic choice in family conversation. The research reviewed reinforces the idea that some families can talk about anything, and some families are more limited on topic choice. The research also reinforces the importance of family strength and open communication. Chapter Three outlines the scope and methodology used in gathering the relevant data for this particular study. Chapter four discusses the study itself, which is aimed at finding communication conduct rules to create open and comfortable communication with teens and parents. Chapter four also provides discussion of the study results with regards to the philosophical and theoretical considerations outlined in Chapter two, as well as the research contained in the literature. Chapter five includes limitations of the study, recommendations for further study, and final conclusions.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Philosophical Considerations

Carl Rogers

Carl Rogers is one of the founders of the idea of client-centered therapy, and falls under the Phenomenological Tradition. According to Griffin, phenomenology is defined as, “intentional analysis of everyday experience from the standpoint of the person who is living it; experience the possibility of understand the experience of self and others (Griffin, 2009, p. 49). Though teens and parents may face common challenges, time and technology have changed those experiences; direct experience can be lived by the person in the experience is the only one who has the first hand knowledge. A safe environment free of judgment or retribution is the best place to create open communication between teens and parents. Rogers believed three conditions were necessary for personality and relationship change: 1.) Congruence- authenticity and genuineness, 2.) Unconditional positive regard, and 3.) Empathetic understanding- defined as the practice of laying aside judgment and values in order to enter another persons’ world without prejudice. (Rogers, 1957, p. 97) On the idea of congruence, both the listener and the speaker must feel the other person is listening with genuine regard to their thoughts and feelings. Both parties must take the concerns of the other seriously, and with true desire to find a positive outcome. Parents face the challenges of taking care of the house, finances, transportation to and from activities, and a hectic work schedule; Teens face the challenges of figuring out who they are, experimenting with new things to find out their likes and dislikes, and
what they want to do with their futures. Teens and parents must hold the challenges of the other with the same respect and with regard to the consequences of their actions. Rogers believed that it was important for the individual to learn to understand himself and make independent choices that are significant in understanding the problem.

Rogers argued a positive unconditional regard was crucial to the well being of the communication between therapist and client. Adults have a desire to remain perfect in the eyes of their children, and often will not share the bumps in the road they encountered on their way to parenthood. Teens do not want to lose the positive regard they have built with parents and may not share important information of events with parents. If there is unconditional love and support for the challenges facing the other person, a more open and honest communication is able to occur. Though a fight with a friend at school may not seem as serious a problem as house payments to parents, it must be taken seriously. Teens have to know that they will make choices that will not please parents, but telling the parents and gaining their support of the choice making process is crucial. Listening with empathy is the third argument Rogers makes, teens and parents are faced with the challenge of listening free of judgment. They are asked to put aside their own judgments and values in order to create the open communication called for by Rogers. Parents have taught teens to make decisions that are in line with the values taught to them, if a teen struggles, parents must listen and put any other feelings aside. Teens may not have made the same choices the parents might have chosen; there is still value in the choice and the consideration of the consequences. Neither parents nor teens are perfect, communication situation must be entered into with an open, judgment-free, minds.
Theoretical Considerations

Gerry Philipsen’s Theory of Speech Codes

Using the constructs on Gerry Philipsen’s Theory of Speech Codes, this review will consider the relevance of the theory in relation to the communication patterns of teenagers and adults. Most of Philipsen’s teaching and research focuses on “cultural codes of communication—what they are, how to learn them, and how they shape communication conduct and life in general” (Philipsen, 2008). A Speech Code is defined as “A historically enacted, socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct.” (Griffin, 2009, p. 238). After a study with a specific group in Chicago between 1969 and 1972, Philipsen 1976 concluded;

Talk is not everywhere valued equally; nor is it anywhere valued equally in all social contexts. Not only do bearers of different cultures speak differently one from another but also, more importantly they hold different assumptions about the value, purposes, and significance of speaking as a mode of human experience (p. 18).

Of the six propositions that now comprise the Theory of Speech Codes, Philipsen formulated Propositions 1, 3, 4 and 5 in 1992; these propositions were refined and the current Proposition 6 added in 1997; and then Proposition 2 was inserted in 2005. The six propositions express —to use Philipsen’s (1997 and 2005) terminology— the distinctiveness, multiplicity, substance, meanings, site, and discursive force of speech codes. The six speech codes can be summed up as (1997):
1. Wherever there is a distinctive culture, there is to be found a distinctive speech code.

2. In any given speech community, multiple speech codes are deployed. People may be affected by other codes or employ more than one code.

3. A speech code involves a culturally distinct psychology, sociology, and rhetoric. Whatever the culture, the speech code reveals structures of self, society, and strategic action.

4. The significance of speaking depends on the speech codes used by speakers and listeners to create and interpret their communication.

5. The terms, rules, and premises of a speech code are inextricably woven into speaking itself.

6. The artful use of a shared speech code is a sufficient condition for predicting, explaining, and controlling the form of discourse about the intelligibility, prudence, and morality of communication conduct.

These communication patterns can be seen in communication with teenagers and adults, when an adult asks how the day went for the teenager, they often receive a simple “fine” or even a grunt. Adults know the power of a conversation and often have expectations that the teenagers will find the same power in a conversation. Conversely, teens often speak to each other in shorter sentences, with the current technology, often reducing conversations to the 140 characters allowed in text messages. While the heart of the challenges may retain many of the same characteristics, parents and other adults must
find a way to communicate with the teenagers in their lives. Teenagers have consistently faced challenges throughout the generations; teens today face the same threats of gossip and public ridicule amplified by the additions of digital media.

**Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Theory**

Genderlect Theory from Deborah Tannen will also be considered with regards to relationships and communication. In her research, Tannen focuses on the communication patterns between men and women, and Moms and daughters. One of her main ideas is that men and women have different communication patterns; this explains the difficulty some people have when trying to communicate with members of groups other than their own. “The answer is for both men and women to try to take each other on their own terms rather than applying the standards of one group to the behavior of the other …… Understanding style differences for what they are takes the sting out of them.” (Tannen, cited in Griffin, 2009, p. 247). While gender will not be the focus of this study, the idea of “taking each other on their own terms rather than trying to” apply the same rules to all types of situations and age groups will be a cornerstone of this study. The stylistic differences between men and women may compare to the differences between parents and teenagers.

Learning not only to understand the patterns of other groups, to respect those differences, and to use them to strengthen conversations; will be keys to creating communication conduct rules that both parties can accept and agree to participate in. Tannen does not prefer one pattern to another, instead, looks at the positive and negative aspects of all types of communication. By understanding the patterns, we are better able
to understand each other. She is careful to consider the context of the communication, and the effect it will have on the situation. There are some situations, such as a bad day, that can be considered when talking to a teenager, this situation might call for a different conversation than if the teen had a great day, or feels confident to tell you about the highs and lows of their day. Tannen also comments on the changes technology is changing our society,

There are positive and negative changes that come with new technology. For instance, young people today-and it’s going to be like this for the rest of their lives-are never alone in the sense that anyone was alone before this technology, young people today-and it’s going to be like this for the rest of their lives-are never alone in the sense that anyone was alone before this technology. You’re always reachable by telephone, by texting, or by instant messaging (Tannen, 2008).

These changes must be taken into account when considering a conversation between adults and teens. Gerry Philipsen wrote most recently, “I use “culture” differently, not to refer to a place, country, or group, but to a code- that is, a historically situated, socially constructed system of terms and meanings, premises and rules. I do not, using my definition, speak of being a “member” of culture, but rather speak of someone who “uses,” “deploys,” or “experiences” a particular cultural code.” (2010) Philipsen was talking about the communication struggles of people new to America, “try to learn and understand a local culture (or cultures) by looking and listening for (1) patterns of communicative conduct that can be observed in the local scene, (2) the terms that the people themselves in a particular social world use for talking and thinking about communicative conduct, (3) the local use, rhetorically, of indigenous meta-
communicative vocabulary, and (4) the use of meta-communicative vocabulary in various forms of communicative activity, including but not limited to, rituals, myths and stories, social dramas, and aligning actions” (1992). Philipsen encouraged people to get to know the culture of a new town by accessing the storytellers of the community, to sit on the porches of families and talk to them about what it is like to be a part of the community. The best way to find one’s feet in terrain infused with a culture (or cultures) that one is trying to figure out is to start walking around, putting one foot in front of the other-to hang out on street corners where people meet to talk, to stop in coffeehouses and peer over shoulders to see what people have on their laptop screens, to enter living rooms and sit for a while with people who live there (2010)

**Teens and Family Communication**

While teens and parents may live in the same community, the cultural codes for each may differ. Teens are trying to figure out who they are, what face they want to present to the world. Moniek Buijzen writes, “In the early stages of identity development, self-presentation and conformity to the peer group or subculture are extremely important” (2010, p. 438). Figuring out the cultural codes and rules to follow can change daily, even hourly with the advent of new technologies. Teens feel pressure to keep up with the latest news and gossip; many teens find it difficult to find time or energy to converse with their parents, who hold a different cultural code. “Although parents initially represent children’s most important source of information, as they get older, children have been shown to increasingly rely on other social influences, including peers and media” (Austin, 2001) While many families are still able to gather around the dinner table and discuss the events of the day, busy lives, work and play schedules, and social
commitments can often take up this time. A study by Jerome Rekart found, “The average high school upperclassman reports spending between seven and eight hours a day using various electronic media, such as television and cellular phones” (Rekart, 2012). Rekart also reported, “Research supports the popular notion that the attention of today’s student is different from students of past generations. These differences, at a cognitive and brain level, are likely to become more widespread as smartphones and laptops are most likely here to stay” (Rekart, 2012). Teens are looking to sources other than parents to get information about the world, and how to form their own personal self-identities.

The strength of families can play a large role in creating the communication environment in which kids learn communication codes and rules. Cook and DeFrain (2005) identified positive communication, which represented primarily the open expression of feelings for the purpose of problem solving and easing tensions, as one primary theme that emerged from the social messages of strong families. Families need each other; teens can teach parents how to text message and use the computer more efficiently, parents can teach digital citizenship and responsible use of new technologies. Paul Schrodt (2009) found that “when families (and primarily parents) communicate in ways that encourage open discussions of ideas and feelings, such environments may strengthen the family by equipping family members with information-processing and behavioral skills needed to cope with internal and external stress. The results indicate that family expressiveness has a strong, positive association with family strength.” In a blog entry by Megan Harvey, she offers five things parents want to say to their teens to create an atmosphere of open and trusting communication. “1. I love hanging out with you, 2. You are such a hard worker, 3. You are so creative, 4. What do you want to do?, 5. I’m so
happy you’re you” (Harvey, 2011). Allowing your home to be a safe place where kids feel comfortable talking to you and asking questions without negative consequences is crucial. The positive statements from Harvey encourage the teen to be who they are, and encourage a positive environment for conversation.

There are several factors that will contribute to the family conversation styles. According to Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) “family communication research has shown that the level of parent-child agreement in reporting family interactions may depend on a number of factors, including general family communication style, the child’s age, and the child’s sex.” Teens and parents both have to want to create an open style of communicating with each other. Both parties must consider the things that they consider valuable to the relationships. According to Woods, Wilcox, Freidman, and Murch, “For practices to be family centered, they must be individualized, strength based, capacity building, and reflective of the culture and values of the family (2011). While one family member might consider dinner at the table every night to be crucial to the family’s success, another member might feel a quick conversation at breakfast as they are getting ready for the day is the perfect conversation. Even if the conversation is a few sentences, the ability to have an open conversation is important.

In a study of parental mediation, An and Lee found, “Active, open and positive family communication between parents and children was also identified as an important determinant to parent’s instructive mediation in increasing children’s perceptions of the negative effects of television” (2010). If parents and teens are able to watch television together, it can provide a safe environment for teens to ask questions, and put those questions in reference to the show, and not necessarily their own experiences. As Potter
(1992) points out, “how often and how well parents communicate with their children about television should be critical in shaping their children’s belief that television is the same as that of our actual world.” Though this study focused directly on the television viewing and reality shaping aspects of family communication, the results easily apply to comparable family situations. The importance of the depth and breadth of the conversations can apply to conversations about academics, social life, digital citizenship, and the sexual lives of teenagers. Creating a safe place, where any topic can be discussed with create safe communication situations.

In order to foster positive communication interactions between parents and teens, there has to be a bond, an inherent desire to see the other doing well in their lives. Ruth Nemzoff in 2008, in an interview with Gina Stepp tells us “I would say that if you want relationships between parents and children to work, you have to take risks and reach out to each other. You have to know that it won’t always be smooth, but that it’s worth the effort” (p. 5). It is important that each member of the conversation genuinely cares about the other, and want nothing but the best for the other person. Nemzoff goes on to say, “Children care a great deal about their parents, and they care whether they have a good relationship or a bad one” (p. 12). A strong relationship will create a willingness to open up to each other, and a trust that the information will not be used later to punish or embarrass any members of the interaction.

One of the best ways to foster open communication is to establish credibility within yourself so that others will consider you credible as well. It is important to remember that teens and parents are on the same team, and want the best for each other. Andrea Zintz, cited in Credibility (2003) edited by Kouzes and Posner, writes “Being
able to build relationships starts by learning how to understand and see things from another’s perspective” (2003). Though teens have life experiences and they are not the same as adult life experiences, it does not lack value. Zintz continues “As fundamental as it might seem, the best thing that leaders can do to show others they respect them and consider them worthwhile is to reach out, listen, and learn” (2003). Teens can teach their parents lessons, as well as the reverse. Adults must show they value the information that is being shared if they want the teen to continue sharing with them. Johan Beeckmans writes in the Kouzes and Posner book “As individuals are listened to, more information becomes available, and people discover greater common ground and reasons to engage in cooperative behavior (2003)”. Returning to Zintz (2003) “True leaders must understand deeply the hurts and bruises, joy and struggles, aims and aspirations of their constituents. Through carefully listening and being sensitive to the needs of others, we can recognize their needs and offer ways to fill them. However, peoples will follow our advice and recommendations only when they trust our competence and believe that we have their best interests at heart” (p. 89).

According to Baxter and Akkoor, “Topic is important for its practical import to family functioning. The majority of the research on topics in the family setting has examined a limited bandwidth of issues, largely whether adolescents report that they disclose or avoid certain topics when communicating with family, mostly parents. Motives for adolescent disclosure/avoidance suggest that topic-related disclosure or avoidance vary in their perceived implications for self, others, and the relationship, and adolescent decisions to disclose/avoid topics are regarded as markers of relationship quality” (2011). The quality of the relationship is an important factor to consider when
creating communication conduct rules. The conversation might be different from Dad to Daughter, than Mother to Daughter, the important thing is that the conversation is relevant and of high quality. All parties must consider the time in the conversation as time well spent.

We can look to the writings of Neil Postman when considering the effect technology and technological advances have on our communication. In his speech, *Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change*, he lays out five distinct ways technology will change our lives. The first idea; “Technology giveth and technology taketh away. This means that for every advantage a new technology offers there is always a corresponding disadvantage” (1998). Deborah Tannen mentioned always having a phone with you, about the concept that you are never unreachable. This should be considered a disadvantage of new technologies because if you are never able to truly turn off, you are always on. “This leads to the second idea, which is that the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are never distributed equally among the population” (1998). An example of this comes with the increasing popularity of text messaging friends, and the upgrade that has to be made to your phone can be costly for the family. This can also be seen when families are sitting down to dinner together and most, if not all, members of the family are on their phones. The fourth idea states, “Technological change is not additive; it is ecological. A new medium does not add something; it changes everything” (1998). Kids as young as six and seven-years-old are seen with phones as their parents are trying to communicate with them. The idea of a face-to-face conversation is not something they might not see as a relevant form of communication.
Teens may prefer to text message their parent instead of a phone call, or even a face-to-face interaction.

**The Rationale**

The effect of social media on the communication between parents and teens has yet to be studied. In consideration of the proliferation of social media sites available to teenagers, the consequences of postings are severely limited and currently unenforceable. The anonymity afforded to teenagers is allowing them to be hateful and mean, digitally and publically, with no ramifications. Teenagers are not held personally responsible for the posts they are creating. It is not until a situation becomes tragic in nature that the issue discussed. Parents need to recognize that times have changed; it is terrible to be told, “I know what it was like, I went to high school.” Nothing will shut down the lines of communication faster than not being felt like you were being taken seriously. The quick release of information, the anonymous nature of posting, and the sheer mass of people that can be contacted with a few keystrokes are the main force behind the expansion of the social media phenomenon. Teenagers need to be able to take concerns to parents and have those concerns taken seriously. Clearly victimization is on the rise, teenagers are old enough to dish it out, and they may not be properly equipped to take it. Parents must remember that technology has not just changed a few things, it has changed everything.

There are many ways for parents to improve the family communication channels with regard to bullying and social media. Effective parenting is closely linked with open lines of communication between parents and children. Kids have to be able to go to
parents, and have the parent listen with empathy. It is true, we have all been in high school at one point, but we never went to high school in the world of social media. Susan Scott (2002) wrote a book, *Fierce Conversations*, in which she discusses having the conversation that might be tough to have, to really be ready to listen both with your ears and your heart, and to make sure that you are ready to hear the unexpected. “Fierce conversations are about moral courage, clear requests, and taking action” (2002).

Deborah Tannen (2006) also reminds parents the importance of keeping up with technological communication. “New technologies entail new ways of staying in touch, reinforcing closeness, and resolving conflicts. But they also provide new ways of expressing anger, hurting feelings, and risking misunderstandings.” Even if it is a quick email to check in, parents still need to check in on their kids. With the advent of new technology, the culture is changing as well. Teenagers are learning to put an entire conversation into 140 characters, and parents are still hoping for full explanation when they ask their teenager how their day was.

**Research Questions**

**RQ 1:** What are some communication conduct rules that can be used by parents and teens to encourage and enhance effective communication?

**RQ 2:** What are some ways to reduce the distance technology can create in families?

**RQ 3:** Can parents and teens find commonalities within their experiences that will serve to bring them closer together?
Chapter Three: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

Using 200 students grades 9-12 and 50 parents and community members from Austin Texas, were recruited for this study to look for common communication patterns among students and parents. Parents could consider what they talked to their parents about, and see if teens are talking to them about the same things. Teens could look at whom they were asking for help from if it was not their parents. When are families talking to each other, and what are they talking about? This sample size created a manageable amount of data to work with, to include various demographics, and to insure quality responses. The school, Legacy High School serves 2,450 students and using every student was not feasible or ideal. The candidates for the study were screened to make sure they were within the age limits for the study (13-18 for students, 30-55 for parents and other community members), were able to write at least three entries in the self-directed journals, and were willing to actively participate in at least two focus group discussions. The participants were chosen because of the mutual trust established with the researcher, and desire to create better family communication. In order for parents to feel safe in participating, they had to feel their contribution would be valued. The participants under the age of eighteen had to have the consent and permission forms signed before they were invited to participate in the study. The candidates for the study were also asked to provide evidence of having an interest in creating communication conduct rules for themselves and their parents. The participants could verbally explain to the moderator the importance
of the study, and the potential positive outcomes related to participating in the study. The participants were also allowed to write about their interest in the study if time did not permit for an introduction to the study.

**Methodology of the Study**

The research used ethnography which is defined as “a method of participant observation designed to help a researcher experience a culture’s complex web of meaning” (Griffin, 2009 p. 23) to gain an understanding of communication patterns between parents and teenagers.

The Phenomenological Tradition was considered, defined as “intentional analysis of everyday experience from the standpoint of the person who is living it; explores the possibility of understanding the experience of self and others.” (Griffin, 2009 p. 49) It is impossible to live the life of another person, even if you share common experiences. It is crucial to consider the person’s story or experiences when looking at the communication choices they make, or choose not to make. “The problem, of course, is that no two people have the same life story. Since we cannot experience another person’s experience, we tend to talk past each other and lament, ‘Nobody understands what it’s like to be me’”. (Griffin, 2009 p. 75) It is tough to consider what it is like to attend high school in the age of Twitter and Facebook. If a bad decision is made, it will be breaking news on the Facebook “news feed” in minutes; parents are often not familiar with the new social medias and their parameters. Parents used to be the first line of defense when teens had questions and concerns, now teens are able to ask friends, or even “Google it”.

After gaining permission from the Principal of *Legacy High School* and IRB from Gonzaga University to conduct this study, information was sent to the campus and the community to give basic information about the study and the research questions were
presented. The information was presented to students using fliers and signage posted around the building. The information was sent out via Naviance, a professional academic planning service used to send information to students about scholarships, college visits, and other academic related services. The Parent Teacher Student Association weekly email news bulletin was used to get the information to the parents and other community members. Potential participants were asked to submit demographic data including: gender, age, grade level, and level of comfort using technology in communication. Participants were sent an invitation to participate in the self-directed journals (at least three entries were required) and the focus group discussions (participants were asked to attend two of the six scheduled discussions). Letters were also sent to the people not chosen to participate explaining why they were not chosen to participate.

**Journals:**

The participants were given the list of self-directed journal topics and asked to think about each one, brainstorm the answer to the topics, and complete at least three responses. The participants were asked to be as specific as possible in their examples. They were asked not to use actual names, dates, or other identifying information about other individuals to protect the identity of the people and situations they were writing about. The participants were encouraged to be as honest as possible, and for the adult participants, they were asked to think about how their parents handled certain situations, and how they deal with them as parents now. They were also asked to reflect on the differences between the two approaches. Journals were one of the preferred methods for this study because people were able to think deeply into the situation and offer better thought out answers. They offer the writer the opportunities take more time to think about specific examples, and more in-depth analysis of both actions and consequences. Journals offer the writer the anonymity necessary when asking questions with high personal risk answers. Self-directed journals allow the writer to write about the topic that speaks to
them, to insure validity of different types of experiences, and encourage the writer to invent questions for themselves on topics they consider important to consider.

**Focus Groups:**

Participants in the focus group discussions were asked to consider their own behavior, and the behavior of their friends at school and at home. Teens are open to reflective thinking and to sharing those thoughts; many teens feel empowered when they are asked their opinion. Instead of wondering about what they are thinking, focus groups allowed for an open conversation about situations, reactions, and retaliations. There are certain situations that teens and parents do not wish to discuss in front of each other and were encouraged to use observation as a means to get their information across with limited threat to themselves.

This is an example of using observation to come to conclusions instead of using direct, possibly self-incriminating examples. No teen experience is the same as another, no parent deals with issues in the exact same way. Every family has unique struggles and triumphs, a 1-5 Likert-style rating scale could have revealed most teens are struggling to communicate with parents, this study was looking with the specifics of those struggles.

The focus group questions tried to extract what it is like to be a teenager in the year 2012. (Appendix E) Six separate focus groups were held before and after school and were open to anyone who had a permission form and consent form on file, and had signed the confidentiality agreement. The participants had to agree to attend at least two of the groups to be considered for the group. Each group started with a few minutes talking about the title of the study and the researcher. Each group was started in the same manner to create continuity within the groups and to provide each participant with the same experience. After the first few groups, the word began to spread across campus that
the groups were interesting, challenging, and not retributive in nature. By the end of the study there were 51 total adults and 105 teen participants.

Each group was unique in make-up and the teens were more willing to volunteer information when the parent attendance was lower. Even though the parents in attendance were not their parents, the adult presence was felt in the groups. The participants were encouraged to sit in a circle to promote conversation and discussion, when the groups became larger, several circles were formed to insure that all participants had an opportunity to give their thoughts and opinions, and to make sure to keep focused on the scenario at hand. On the occasions there were more than twenty participants the groups were split into at least two groups. When the groups were split, they were reflective of each other; if there were four boys, they were spilt between the groups to keep the groups as identical as possible.

The groups were scheduled to last an hour each, for several reasons. Keeping the groups on track was important, keeping the conversation fresh and not going in circles, and being respectful of the time of the participants. The groups in the morning were easy to keep on track because there was a defined ending time, students had to get to classes and parents had to get to work. The groups in the evening were harder to end on time; once a good conversation had started it was difficult to cut people off for the sake of the time limit. The time limit was held to, if there were people still wishing to participate in a particular conversation, they were encouraged to write their thoughts in their self-directed journals, and get them to me before the end of the study. There were four parents who attended the focus groups and chose to be silent observers because once they arrived at the group; they did not feel comfortable sharing with the group. They did leave thoughts on the conversation with me upon leaving the group. Focus groups were used to spark conversation between teens and adults; specifically a conversation about communication patterns between parents and teens. Participants were able to consider the offerings of
other group members’ experiences and reflect upon their own personal stories. Participants interacted with each other using their communication patterns, while keeping their own pattern in mind.

Each group started with the same scenario read to them, given a minute or two to consider and formulate their responses and then shared with the group. (See Appendix H) Question one: how would you handle this situation from your point of view, how would you like the situation to be handled if you were the other person (how would a teen want the situation to be handled by their parent, for example)? The participants were given about one minute to consider the scenario. They were also given the scenario on paper in case they wanted to read it again, or review for contextual clues. After ten minutes of conversation and discussion, a second scenario was introduced to the groups. The same procedures were followed as in the first scenario where the participants were read the scenario, given a copy to read for themselves, given a minute or two to think and formulate a response, and then asked to share with the group. At this point there is a poster on the wall that considers where the teens are going for advice and answers, and another poster that maps where parents are going to get information. The two charts are considered at this point in the conversation, and the group considers any patterns or discrepancies. (See discussion for patterns from the posters). Ten minutes of discussion was spent on scenario two, and five to seven minutes spent on the posters.

In scenario four the groups liked that the situations in scenarios one and four were both about bullying, but about different issues and in different manners. After the fourth scenario the posters on the walls were again considered and additional information was included on the posters.

The participants were thanked for their time, and encouraged to finish the self-directed journals and please return them. Using scenarios for the focus groups worked well because the participants did not feel the need to self-disclose any information, they
were encouraged to consider the people in the scenario. The parents also liked the scenario format because the stories were general enough to apply to a wide audience, while being specific enough to the general demographic of *Legacy High*. Any sort of personal experience sharing was encouraged in the self-directed journals.

A group of teens, parents, and educators was formed to create the scenarios. The requirements for the scenarios were simple; they had to be real-life situations, involve the investigation of the action and reaction of both age groups, and include topics that were not considered easy to talk about. Casual conversation scenarios were discouraged, such as asking about face care advice from a parent. Scenarios had to deal with a communication situation and deal with several barriers to communication. Scenarios had to include both age groups equally and represent a variety of cultural and economic issues. The scenarios in this study represent an urban high school located in the fourth largest city in Texas, and the challenges faced by the community members. Members from several social service agencies within the community were invited to help create the scenarios including Planned Parenthood, Any Baby Can, Communities in Schools, Austin Healthy Adolescent Initiative, WIC, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Safe Place, Alcoholics Anonymous, AwakeAwareAlive, and United Way. Several scenarios made for the study were not used in the focus groups due to content. There were also add on's, or extra information to be considered, for each scenario to dig deeper into an issue or further a conversation.

The scenarios allowed the focus groups to talk about situations while allowing for little personal risk. The groups were able to talk about other people without having to risk sharing information that might be considered private to their own lives. The groups were able to see the perspective offered from the other age group and look for connections
between actions and reactions. Teens were able to ask parents why they would react in a certain situation, and parents were able to ask the same of teens. The groups never had family members in them, and the confidentiality agreements allowed for the communication to be pure and genuine. It was easier to talk about a made up scenario than to discuss personal situations, you could talk about a cousin with a drug use issue rather than talk about yourself and a drug use issue. The combination of self-directed journals and focus groups were well suited for this study; participants were allowed to risk as little or as much as they were comfortable with. They were encouraged to share both privately and publicly, with others and interpersonaly.
Chapter Four: The Study

Introduction

The students involved in the focus groups were representative of the major ethnic groups at Legacy High, about 55% Hispanic and 44% White. The White parents dominated the groups with 43 members and 7 Hispanic parents. There are several reasons for the skew in the parent group. The groups were chosen at times when many parents were at work or home with little kids and were not able to attend the groups. Many of the White parents at Legacy High are in a situation where only one parent in the home works and the parents are available in the day to attend events like this one. Before school was tough because people are trying to get to work and other activities and after school was tough because people were ready to be finished with the day, they were getting hungry, and focus was often on the dinner and evening activities instead of the conversation at hand. Larger groups did provide for more input, though not all members were able to speak in the larger groups. One of the larger groups fell into groupthink and several people were reluctant to participate with a differing opinion than that of the larger group.

Data Analysis

The information from the self-directed journals was very interesting. The first question: What is the most traumatic event that happened to you in your high school experience? Were you able to discuss this event with your parents or other adults in your life? Teens and parents were encouraged to answer this question. Teasing/ Bullying (26%
teen, 34% parent), Sexual Assault/Sexual Abuse (18% teen, 13% parent), STD/STI (13% teen, 4% parent), Alcohol related (27% teen, 33% parent), Fight/Physical Aggression (13% teen, 15% parent), Poverty/Need for food or clothing/Homlessness (3% teen, less than 1% parent). Divorce was the first event listed for 46% (teen) and 27% (parent).

(After reviewing this data, I looked to the second event to get more specific details). One useful finding was that even though we are in a time of significant college interest and awareness, neither teens nor parents listed grades, academics, or college/post-secondary experience as major events in their lives.

The second question from the self-directed journals was: *What role does technology play in your life? What are the major changes have you seen in the last ten years that have changed communication in regards to technology?* Teens and parents were encouraged to answer this question as well. Results indicated very different experiences for teens and parents. Telephones (teens used this less than 10% of the time, 89% of parents noted this as a major change in the last ten years). Cell Phones (teens and parents stated this had changed 100% in the last ten years). Computer (teens and parents stated this had changed 100% in the last ten years. Teens reported more and more use of technology in the classroom, 92% reporting to have a computer at home, 43% in their own room). Instant Messaging (100% changed in the past ten years. Teens reported this to be in the decline in the past two years, using iPhones and other smartphone devices to communicate). Facebook (and other related social media sites) (100% change in the past ten years, as this did not exist until a 2005). Radio/Television/Film (84% of teens reported having a television in their rooms, able to watch unsupervised, program choice
left up to the teens. 95% of parents reported this as a major change in the past ten years, and as a major change in their lives as teens).

The third question from the self-directed journals brought out interesting ideas: *Are there situations where you avoid honesty to avoid punishment? (Teens only answer this question)*? Partying/ Not telling the truth as to whereabouts of the teen/ Sneaking out-27%, Drug/ Alcohol Use- 52%, Grades/ Attendance/ School Issues- 9%, Hazing/ Bullying- 12%, Sexual Health Issues- 58%, Dating Choices and Behaviors- 68%. Many of the journal entries talked about more than one situation, first and second listed behaviors were taken into consideration. Parents wrote in journals about the openness of communication with their teens, and teens were writing that there are still things that cannot be discussed with their parents.

The first theme that arise from the self-directed journals from the students (and a few parents) was *Respect the Struggle*. Over 95% of the respondents recognized that every participant had been through at least some high school, though high school in 2012 is significantly different than any other time. A mom of a graduating senior explained in her self-directed journal:

*I went to parties I was not supposed to attend, hung out with people I was not supposed to hang out with, did stupid stuff. The only thing I had to worry about was the wrath of my parents, not some video of my behavior showing up on social media the next day.*

There were several teens that felt the same way but had a different perspective, a junior girl stated in the focus group:
I know it is tough to be my Mom, I sneak out all the time, I take my cell phone back from her when she grounds me from it, when I am grounded in my room, all I have to do is Skype my friends. I can claim that I need my computer to work on schoolwork, or to look up scholarship opportunities. I understand how grounding used to be a punishment that meant something, now it is meaningless.

A very perceptive dad commented:

When I was a teen, drugs were dangerous for sure, but not like today. I do not want to tell my Son that I did drugs when I was his age because he looks up to me and I do not want to look weak in his eyes. I also need him to understand that the drugs out there today are mixed and cut and laced with all sorts of s@#t and it can be really dangerous. I may not know all the answers, but I want to let him know that I can help him find the information he is looking for. There has to be mutual respect and sharing, honesty is a two-way street.

This idea is directly tied to Philipsen's fifth speech code about the terms and rules of speech codes. The rule of the code between this parent and teen are a common experience, and following common rules. If parents want teens to be honest about their behaviors and habits, parents must be honest as well.

The second theme came out strongly in the focus groups- Just listen, don't try to fix me. Teens wanted someone to be on his or her side and listen to them, to tell them they were right in the situation (even when they were not). One teen had an altercation with a teacher at school, upon further review the teen knew they were in the wrong. The teen commented:
I know I should have turned in my paper on time, I know I should have double checked for spelling errors before turning in my test; can’t you just be on my side and agree with me that the teacher is mean and rude and hates me?

Teens use Facebook and Twitter to be heard, to express themselves for the whole world to hear their voice. Teens wanted parents to ask questions, and then actually listen to the response and not jump to a quick solution. Parents wanted to let their teens know they are there for them, the teens wanted to make sure the offer was unconditional.

The third theme was “Empathetic Listening.” Parents went through the same struggles as the teens in the groups; on a wide scale the struggles are the same but with the introduction of technology, some things will never be the same. One of the parents in the last focus groups commented:

I went to high school, I made bad decisions, but my bad decisions were not the newest viral video on youtube.com. I was scared of my parents finding out what I was up to, now you have to think about everyone finding out. I was not worried about my employer or potential college asking to review my weekend pictures and activities, technology has changed everything.

The focus groups decided on the term “back in the day” to talk about parent generations, this allowed parents to participate in the conversation without giving up their actual age. A Mom brought up an interesting idea about the pressures put on parents by other parents with regards to raising their teens:

Back in the day, you could be gone for the weekend at a friend’s house and it was fine, now my friends are telling me if I am not aware of my teens every movement,
Another parent wrote about the same struggle in her self-directed journal:

*My friend went out and partied when she was a teenager, this is how she knows when her teen is lying to her; it is because she told those same lies herself when she was younger.*

**RQ 1: What are some communication conduct rules that can be used by parents and teens to encourage and enhance effective communication?**

Three communication conduct rules were created by the focus groups, and member checked to make sure they were accurate and appropriate to teens and parents. The first is the idea of a “step-in-parent.” Teens were often frightened to talk to parents about issues they were concerned about because they were going to be punished for life. If the teen was really in trouble, they could go to the step-in parents and ask for assistance. The step in parent had to be agreed upon by teens and parents, and they had to accept the responsibilities for the teens and the parents. Step-in parents are not required to deal out punishment in any way, they are there to stand in for the parent in case of emergency, or if they are out of town, or if your scared to talk to your actual parents about an issue of concern. In the focus group conversations, a female student told us of her experience:

*I was at a party where there was alcohol, and I was not supposed to be there. I was with people I was not allowed to be hanging out with, and going to a party in a place where I had been forbidden to go. Of course I was terrified when the party got busted and I had to call a parent to come and pick me up. I called my*
best friends Mom. She was able to come and pick me up, get me home safely, gave me a shower and got me cleaned up, and then took me home after a few hours of sleep. It was great to be able to sleep and get calm before talking to my parents, who would have really freaked out on me.

The parents were also encouraged to find “step-in-teens”, where a parent could go to the teen and ask them about situations they may be concerned about, without having to take the specific struggle to their own teen.

The second idea is “The Rule of 24”, if there is a family crisis, struggle, fight or miscommunication, families would wait 24 hours to discuss the issues. After 24 hours, tempers may have calmed down, emotions are more easily taken out of the interaction, and teens and parents would have time to think about solutions for the problems. Families reported saying things in the heat of the moment and then regretting the things said later once they were calm again. Teens can have time to think of solutions that are appropriate for the consequences of their actions; parents can gain perspective on the events.

The third idea was more focused on the need for accurate information. Teens wanted websites where they could get accurate information:

*Without using too many big words, you should use smaller words that mean more. I need simple terms that I can understand. If I wanted medical advice from a doctor who will talk above my head, I would go to the doctor. I want a site where they are using words I am familiar with so that I can actually understand what is going on without needing a dictionary.*

Teens were able to go online to make sure they had solid information and then go to
parents with follow up questions, but if they did not understand what they were looking at, it was tough to ask questions about it. Allowing more community resources to be available through social media sites was also encouraged, there is more room for error and bad information to be shared through these sites, and some parents argued that even bad information could start a great conversation.

**RQ 2: What are some ways to reduce the distance technology can create in families?**

Parents reflected on their own information seeking patterns, when they had a question about an issue as a teen, they went to their parents. The pattern for parents was; talks to family, then a trusted adult, next go to a community resource, counselor or health care professional, and finally go to friends for answers. Though the parents reported more and more usage of “Googling” for more information on matters involving their teens, it is often not their first thought. For teens the pattern was different; they went to friends first, then a community resource, then family, and then a trusted adult. Teens will consider a website about dating violence before they talk to parents about being in a potentially abusive relationship.

Parents reported a significant decrease in family communication due to the time constraints placed on their teens by the amount of activities they are involved in and their varied interests. Family dinner every night at 6 PM may be a thing of the past; teens are playing sports, participating in cheerleading, Boy Scouts and such. They come home exhausted by eight hours of school and after school activities, eat dinner, shower and get right back to homework. Some teens go to school all day, come home and get straight to work on their video game high scores, maybe some guitar practice. Results from both
types of teens are presented here. Parents want to talk to teens and look for opportunities to help them; this often does not happen when teens are old enough to drive themselves and are constantly plugged into iPods and other technology.

Teens reported being interested in being able to go to parents with information and questions, but were unsure how to approach them about a touchy topic, such as parties, dating behaviors, sexual health, and drug use. A sophomore boy commented in the focus group conversations:

I want to be able to go to my Mom or Dad and ask them questions, they are the ones who are most likely to answer me honestly, and look out for my best interests. I want to be able to ask questions about sex, but I do not want to have to sit through ‘the talk’, that will just be embarrassing for both of us.

**RQ 3:** Can parents and teens find commonalities within their experiences that will serve to bring them closer together?

At the heart of the issue, the struggles are the same; parents want to create rules for order, teens want to stretch the rules and figure out who they are. In both experiences, there are bullies, drugs, sex, teen parents, academic demands, social pressures to conform, body issues, and the list goes on. A parent wrote in her self-directed journal:

When I was younger, all I had to do was make good grades, and keep my nose clean and I was pretty much left alone by my parents. They did not go out of their way to protect me because I was pretty good at protecting myself. As a parent of a teenager, I feel that I need to be more informed about what is going on, the choices being made.
Though time has changed the nature of some of these issues and recreated the nature of the challenge, it is still hard to be a teen, and hard to be the parent of a teen. Teens cited retribution as the number one reason for not talking to parents about struggles they were facing. A teen wrote in his self-directed journal:

*If I go to my Mom to ask her about a situation I saw at a party, she will think I am taking about myself and I will get grounded for life. My parents tell me they were never like this when they were younger; I do not want to disappoint them with my choices and behaviors.*

A very interesting idea came from an early morning focus group study:

*I want my parents to talk to me about drinking, but not when I am in trouble for going to a party. I want my parents to talk to me about sex, but not when I am about to leave the house for a first date. I want my parents to talk to me about drug use and side effects, but not when I bring home a friend who dresses in all black and does not talk much. I want them to talk to be before it becomes an issue, not when the shit hits the fan. And talk to me about real consequences, tell me colleges are allowed to require my Facebook user name and password, remind me employers are going to look at the pictures I post on my sites. Give it to me straight, no need to sugarcoat anything for me.*

**Discussion**

The data collected in this study was able to answer the research questions posed in this thesis.
**RQ 1:** What are some communication conduct rules that can be used by parents and teens to encourage and enhance effective communication?

Answer: There are several found in this study. The first rule is the idea of the “step-in-parent.” In the time of technology, parents having several jobs to support the family, and the nuclear family becoming more and more extended, the desire for positive adult relationships surfaced. These findings are consistent with Philipsen’s third speech code; whatever the culture, the speech code reveals structures of self, society, and strategic action. Parents and teens seemed willing to take action to improve communication with each other. Following the ideas of Carl Rogers with regard to positive unconditional regard, a “step-in-parent” would allow the teen to have a safe person to call in an emergency, while maintaining a positive relationship with their actual parents. In her interview with Ruth Nemzoff written by Gina Stepp, Stepp tells us of the importance of taking risks to make relationships with teens and parents workable. Teens have to reach out to parents for advice and parents must be there willing to give the advice, even if they are upset about the situation.

The second rule is “The rule of 24”. Teens and parents liked the idea of a “cooling-off” period, it allows the emotions to be taken out of the situation. If teens feel they will be able to rationally discuss issues with their parents, they will be more likely to talk to their parents. Considering the research by Susan Scott in her book, *Fierce Conversations*, one of the most important findings was that teens want to talk, and more importantly, they want someone to listen. They want parents to stop working on other things, or looking up something for work, they want parents to sit still and just listen.
**RQ 2:** What are some ways to reduce the distance technology can create in families?

Answer: There are several ways to bring families together.

The research by Deborah Tannen brings up the idea of parents and teens finding ways to connect with them using technology. Teens text message their friends to say hello in the middle of the day, why shouldn’t a parent send a quick text to remind their teens to be confident about a test, or simply to ask how the day is going. Something as simple as a little smiling face can make all the difference in a teens day. Neil Postman reminded that technology is never equally distributed evenly among the population, even a simple stick note stuck in a lunch bag to remind teens that they are loved will work wonders. Sticking to the pattern of family dinners allows for a set time for parents and teens to talk together about issues they are each facing. If teens see parents struggling at work, they will be more willing to talk to that parent about issues they are struggling with. A quick check in over toast for breakfast can set a positive tone for the day for all participants, take intentional steps to make sure communication is valued in your home, and it will flourish.

In a time where parents are working two jobs, sometimes three just to support the family, teens are in several extracurricular activities, time to sit and chat is one of the first sacrifices made by families. Communication should be the foundation of a solid relationship with teens and parents. Parents must respect that teens may or may not want to talk about all events in their lives, teens do crave their privacy. It is crucial that teens know when a situation is important enough to speak up and ask for assistance. While
these conversations may be tough at first, once they become habit, they will feel more comfortable in conversation.

RQ 3: Can parents and teens find commonalities within their experiences that will serve to bring them closer together?

Answer: Yes. The teen years are a time plagued with questions and concerns; teens feel better knowing parents made decisions that brought about unintended consequences as well. It is tough to talk to a parent that you consider to be perfect, it is nice to know someone has faced struggles like yours, and they have lived to tell about it.

Gerry Philipsen’s research adds to the conversation, talk must become more valued in our society, and those values must travel across the planet. Making time to talk to each other must be of upmost importance, teens and parents can learn from each other. Teens will someday be parents themselves, and this model of open communication will help when they are facing similar situations with their own families. Deborah Tannen reminds parents and teens that we have different communication patterns, and those patterns must be respected in order for communication to be relevant and useful. Sharing stories from the past can help teens navigate their own challenges, a junior girls wrote in her journal,

Knowing that my parents are not saints is helpful. I only know them as the well dressed, well put-together people I see leaving in the morning. Once my Mom told me she did dumb stuff when she was younger helped me to see her as a person, someone I can actually relate to. I just found out my parents met when my dad was driving under the
influence and was taken to the hospital, and my mom was a nurse at the time and it was love at first sight. Parents are people too!
Chapter Five: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

A limit on the size of the focus groups would have been a more ideal situation. Some of the groups were small enough that everyone felt as though they had a chance to share, and other groups were so large that several groups had to be made to accommodate the participants. Consideration of the geographical region of the participants is also a factor that should be considered. In the south conversation patterns tend to be slower, a family dinner can take up to two hours on Sunday afternoons, whereas in the north, patterns of conversation tend to be shorter and more quickly to the point. If there is a sensitive subject to be discussed, lack of time can inhibit the flow of the conversation.

Another limitation of the study was holding the focus groups with parents and teens where a relationship has been formed between the researcher and the participants had a negative impact on the information shared in the focus groups. Some teens did not want to talk about an issue because they felt the trust and respect created in the relationship would somehow be altered. Having a focus group facilitator with no knowledge of the participants would have been ideal. While at first glance having a relationship would lead to trust and more honesty, these relationships seemed to have a negative impact on the information shared. Parents did not want to comment on how they handled the situation because it may have had a negative impact or perception, and teens did not want to look bad in front of peers, and some teens wanted to look as though they had struggled in areas they did not really struggle in just to have something to add to the conversation.
Considerations for Further Research

One of the first considerations for future study would be to hold the focus groups for parents later in the evening so a more diverse group could be represented. Another improvement would be to offer childcare to the parents who wanted to attend and had little kids that needed assistance. Creating focus groups around ethnicity would be a valuable distinction as different groups hold communication in higher regards than do others. Some cultures prefer their teens to be vocal and active and some prefer the adage "children should be seen and not heard." Income level of the participants should also be considered; some families reported work schedules that included almost zero face-to-face interaction time as a family. As the teens were arriving home from school, parents were off to work to support the family and in bed when the teens woke up in the morning to fix breakfast. It is tough to have conversation when you find yourself rarely in the room with your family. The idea of income level also bring up new questions, do teens talk to parents about bullying at school when at home the struggle is just to put food on the table and insure rent for the next month. Often important topics can be lowered in priority because they seem less important than food, clothing and shelter. Blended families would also be an interesting study, bringing together different communication styles and patterns to look for patterns and discrepancies would provide relevant information.

The age between the parent and the teen should be considered, generational communication patterns are clear, as we enter an age of parents and teens being closer and closer together due to more teen pregnancies, these patterns will change. Creating focus groups that took educational levels into consideration would create different results. Though some people with little or no education may not understand the value of parent
and teen communication, some people with higher levels of education might seem unapproachable by teens that are intimidated by their parents. There is also room for research to consider teens that are more educated than their parents and feel as though they could not go to their parents with more complex questions. The Internet usage patterns of this group would be interesting, those kids who look to a website first for information before asking parents or other adults in their lives.

Birth order of the teens should be considered, teens might be more willing to talk to parents if they have seen siblings encounter the same struggles they are currently facing. The older siblings might have been more harshly punished for something that seems like a much smaller issue to a younger sibling. Consideration of the sex of the parent and the teen will create interesting results. There are some things that females do not want to talk to Dads about (body image issues, sexual health issues, etc.) as well as some Dads not being comfortable talking to teen daughters. There are some things teen boys want to talk to Dads about, or other trusted male adults, not Moms. Competition by the parents in the focus group in this study was an interesting pattern, some parents wanted to look as though they were "perfect parents" who had perfect relationships with their teens, and in some cases this lead to other parents shutting down in the focus group in an effort to "save face" in front of the other parents. There was also an over reporting of some parents in order to appear more socially desirable, a problem would come up and they would have a comment, each and every time, even if the comment did not seem to directly correlate with the topic at hand.
Conclusions

Most if not all of these areas of consideration are in direct correlation to Philipsen's third speech code, *a speech code involves a culturally distinct psychology, sociology, and rhetoric*. Creating mixed focus groups with parents and teens should have been reconsidered. There were several times when teens would look around the room before speaking to make sure there was not a friend of their parents in the room before being honest. There were cultural differences, some cultures thinking that others would not understand what it was like to be in their shoes; the struggles of a white middle-class family are different than those of a poor working-class family with a single parent.

In order to create communication situations that are useful for teens and parents, several concessions must be made by all parties. Parents were teens once, not in the same world teens live in now. With the ever-changing horizon of technology being integrated with communication, new and improved methods for talking between families must be created. The struggles being faced must be considered with respect, parents and teens must feel their contributions are valuable. The issues teens face will continue to evolve and in order to continue to grow and change with the times, communication rules will have to change as well. In fifteen years many of the teens in this study will be parents and will be starting to have these conversations with their own families. They will be telling their own kids what it was like “back-in-the-day”.
References


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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Consent Form

Communication between the Boomer and the Jackass Generation:
Creating Communication Conduct Rules for Teens and Parents

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**Purpose and Benefits**

Creating communication conduct rules for teens and parents will benefit all parties as we navigate the technological challenges we face. This study will look at communication rules and offer suggestions to teens and parents to keep lines of communication healthy and productive.

**Procedures**

Participants will be asked to interact in a focus group to talk about their personal struggles in high school. Each participant will be asked to write self-directed journals with at least three entries to share information they might prefer to keep to themselves and not reveal to a focus group. Focus groups will be limited to an hour each in length. The participants will be encouraged to type the journals to protect the identity of the person. Age group and gender will be required on the journals to keep the information within the correct categories. Participants will be asked to consider and analyze their current level of comfort with regards to talking to their family members about subjects that could be considered high risk (bullying, digital citizenship, and technology usage, etc.) Participants will be asked to attend at least two of the six scheduled focus-group meetings.

**Risk, Stress or Discomfort**

The risks for this study are minimal. Participants will only be asked to disclose information that is within their comfort level for the focus-group and the self-directed journals.

**Other Information**

Participants may leave the study at any time for any reason. All information will remain confidential as far as the self-directed journals are concerned. If a participant leaves the group prior to the end of the study, their self-directed journals will be kept for the
remainder of the study. If anyone feels uncomfortable in a focus-group because of the other members in that specific group, they will be encouraged to join a group they are more comfortable with. Please do not hesitate to contact myself or my mentor at any point in the process if there are any questions. Contact information is listed above.

Signature of Principal Investigator  Date

The study described above has been explained to me, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this activity. I agree to attend at least two of the six scheduled focus-group sessions. I agree to at least three self-directed journals which will become property of the investigator. I have had an opportunity to ask questions. I give permission to record, intercept, and/or divulge conversations (as appropriate) in which I participate during this activity.

Signature of Subject  Date

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian  Date

(This must be signed by a parent/guardian before participation in the study will be allowed.)
Appendix B: Biographical information for the participants

Age: ______
Gender: __________

Level of completed education (if you are in ninth grade, please list ninth grade; if you have completed education beyond that please list that here.)
___________________________________

List the members ages and genders of other family members. Please do NOT list names
___________________________________
___________________________________
___________________________________
___________________________________

Are any of the above listed family members participating in this study?
_______________________________

On a typical day how much of your time is used with technology to communicate

Heavy user- 6-8 hours per day
Moderate user 4-6 hours per day
Fair user 2-4 hours per day
Light user less than 2 hours per day
Appendix C: Journal Topics for self-directed journals (please pick at least three)

Please consider the following journal topics and write about the ones that spark a particular memory for you. Specific examples will be most appreciated and helpful for this study. Any reference to your answer or particular situation will be referenced under another name. Your age group (adult or teenager) and gender (male or female) may be referenced in the results of the study.

A response of at least \( \frac{3}{4} \) of a page would be helpful. If there are responses that are longer in length, they will still be considered for the study.

What is the most traumatic event that happened to you in your high school experience? Were you able to discuss this event with your parents or other adults in your life?

What role does technology play in your life? What are the major changes have you seen in the last ten years that has changed communication in regards to technology?

Are there situations where you avoid honesty to avoid punishment?

Do you feel you can talk to your family members about a variety of topics? Are there topics that are not acceptable in your family?

Are there adults you can go to when you have questions about life situations? Are there other teenagers in your life you can go to when you have questions about life situations?

Do you feel more comfortable with a particular parent for specific situations? (Do you feel more comfortable in dealing with certain situations with particular members of your family?)

Do you feel comfortable with your current knowledge of technology? Do you feel comfortable asking a family member for help when you have a technology related question?
There is irritation when differing views are expressed in my family. Our family has created a system to deal with these situations.

Are there topics in your family that are “off limits” for conversation? Are there adults in your life you can go to in this situation?

I feel my family bonds are strong and healthy. I seek support from my family.
Appendix D: Script for the small group discussions

Good morning (afternoon) and thank you for joining me today and supporting my efforts to better understand communication between adults and teens. You will be asked a series of questions (the same ones used in the self-directed journals) and asked to respond to them in your group.

By staying for the group conversation you are agreeing to adhere to the following rules:

1. Do not interrupt the person speaking. Everyone here has valid ideas to share and all conversation is valuable.

2. What is said in the room stays in the room. The upmost respect for each person and their opinions will be demanded.

3. Do not use last names or other identifying features of another person.

4. At any time a participant feels uncomfortable, they may choose to leave the group.

5. Allow each member of the group the opportunity to participate in the conversation.

Please raise your hand to signify that you understand these rules and that you are willing to participate in the conversation within the rules.

(Anyone not willing to follow the rules will be asked the leave the group)

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and participation. Let's get started with the first question...
Appendix E: Scenarios

Scenario One:

“A student is being bullied at school and online. Her classmates are tormenting her about her weight and lack of stylish clothing. There are several pictures added to Facebook accounts, and daily posts about the student. The young lady asks a teacher for help and they go to the counselor’s office to follow the proper procedure and the bullying does not stop. After a particularly vicious posting, the student goes home to tell her Mom about the posting. In an effort to shield the teenager from harm, the parent takes away the cell phone and the computer. The parent considers this the best way to handle the situation, the teen feels punished and cut off from friends and technology.”

Scenario Two:

“A boy comes to school and starts telling his friends that his cousin has been acting weird lately, really tired and bored with everything. The cousin has been known to use recreational zanax in the past and the friend is scared his cousin is really in trouble.”

Scenario three:

“A 17-year-old girl has just been told by her friends that they are going to quit hanging out with her. They say that the girl is too unreliable and stands them up too often. They think the girl is drinking too much. In fact, at a recent party she passed out and couldn’t remember what had happened. It seems like her life revolves around drinking these days (when to do it, how she will get it, etc.). She wonders maybe she should talk to someone about what is happening.”

Add On: Your friend is the designated driver. However it's late, she's passed out, and you have to get home. What do you do?
Scenario four:

“A 14-year-old’s best friend from the neighborhood is getting seriously bullied. A group of girls are saying that she’s too fat to ever have a boyfriend. The friend says it is no big deal, but some of the stuff is pretty harsh. The friend said that she is worried about her weight, but her family has horrible eating patterns, and she does not know how to cook and she has no money.”

Add On: The best friend has gotten really down. She's now cutting herself. How could she get help?

Scenario five:

"A 13-year-old boy's friends all boast that they've had sex. He doesn't have a girlfriend and his friends are teasing him a lot about that. There's no one he really likes right now but feels a lot of pressure to hook up. He wonder's if something's wrong with him shouldn't he have a girlfriend already? How could he get help?

Add On: The boy slept with a few girls. Now he's having really painful burning every time he goes to the bathroom. How can he get help?
Appendix F: Letter to Participants not Chosen to Participate in the Study

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in the study for my thesis project titled “Communication between Generation X and the Jackass Generation: Creating Communication Conduct Rules for Teens and Parents.” I was overwhelmed at the amount of responses. At this time you will not be considered for the study for the following reasons:

______ You do not fit the age constraints for this study (13-18 for teens and 30-55 for adults)

______ You are unable to complete all of the requirements for the study

______ not able to commit to three self-directed journals

______ not able to commit to at least two small group discussions

______ there are too many people with your specific demographics enrolled in the study (too many 13 year-old females already in the study, etc.)

______ You do not fit one or more of the demographic requirements for the study

Again, I appreciate your interest in participating in my study. I will let you know of any future studies that I may need participation in. The results of the study will be published in May and will be available for viewing at the Austin High Library.
Appendix G: Permission Form From the Principal to use School Facilities

Aimee Finney has been teaching Communication Applications at Austin High School for fourteen years. Aimee and I have had several conversations about her thesis project *Communication Between the Boomer and the Jackass Generation: Creating Communication Conduct Rules for Teens and Parents*. I have read her thesis proposal and her Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research Application. I know that she will be asking for participants in her study from the student body at Austin High and community members.

With my signature, I give Aimee Finney permission to ask for volunteers at Austin High, and to conduct focus groups on campus, in the Library and classrooms as needed. I am aware that students will be invited to participate through Naviance, the PTSA newsletter, and fliers posted around campus. I understand the focus groups will be held before and after school. I understand that no extra credit will be given to the students for their participation in the study, and they may choose to halt participation at any time. I also understand the materials for this study will be held on campus for at least five years.

Thank you very much for this opportunity for Aimee Finney to continue her course of study.

Lucio Calzada Jr., Ed.D.
Principal of Austin High School
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Austin, Texas 78703
Main (512) 414-2505
Administrative Assistant (512) 414-1250
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Appendix H: Trends from Self-Directed Journals

What is the most traumatic event that happened to you in your high school experience? Were you able to discuss this event with your parents or other adults in your life? (Teens and Parents)

Teasing/ Bullying (26% teen, 34% parent)
Sexual Assault/Sexual Abuse (18% teen, 13% parent)
STD/ STI (13% teen, 4% parent)
Alcohol related (27% teen, 33% parent)
Fight/ Physical Aggression (13% teen, 15% parent)
Poverty/ Need for food or clothing/Homlessness (3% teen, less than 1% parent)

Divorce was the first event listed for 46% (teen) and 27% (parent) (After reviewing this data, I looked to the second event to get more specific details).

Interesting find: even though we are in a time of significant college interest and awareness, neither teens nor parents listed grades, academics, or college/ post-secondary experience as major events in their lives.

What role does technology play in your life? What are the major changes have you seen in the last ten years that has changed communication in regards to technology? (Teens and Parents)

Telephones (teens used this less than 10% of the time, 89% of parents noted this as a major change in the last ten years)

Cell Phones (teens and parents stated this had changed 100% in the last ten years)

Computer (teens and parents stated this had changed 100% in the last ten years. Teens reported more and more use of technology in the classroom, 92% reporting to have a computer at home, 43% in their own room)

Instant Messaging (100% changed in the past ten years. Teens reported this to be in the decline in the past two years, using iPhones and other smartphone devices to communicate)
Facebook (and other related social media sites) (100% change in the past ten years, as this did not exist until a 2005.)

Radio/ Television/ Film (84% of teens reported having a television in their rooms, able to watch unsupervised, program choice left up to the teens. 95% of parents reported this as a major change in the past ten years, and as a major change in their lives as teens).

Are there situations where you avoid honesty to avoid punishment? (Teens Only)

Partying/ Not telling the truth as to whereabouts of the teen/ Sneaking out- 27%
Drug/ Alcohol Use- 52%
Grades/ Attendance/ School Issues- 9%
Hazing/ Bullying- 12%
Sexual Health Issues- 58%
Dating Choices and Behaviors- 68%

Many of the journal entries talked about more than one situation, first and second listed behaviors were taken into consideration.

Do you feel you can talk to your family members about a variety of topics? Are there topics that are not acceptable in your family? (Teens Only)

Any topic is up for conversation with my family- 47%
Sexual Health Issues- 23%
Drug/ Alcohol Usage- 43%
Post-Secondary Options- 12%
Dating Choices and Behaviors- 22%

Interesting find: Teens reported being Lesbian/ Bi-sexual/Gay/ Transgendered as a major topic that was not up for family discussion. Most of the teens cited religion as the reason for not talking to parents honestly about choices and behaviors.
Are there adults you can go to when you have questions about life situations? Are there other teenagers in your life you can go to when you have questions about life situations? *(Teens and Parents)*

Parents- Family, Trusted Adult, Community Resource, Counselor, Health Care Professional, Friends

Teens- Friends, Community Resource, Counselor, Health Care Professional, Family, Trusted Adult

Do you feel more comfortable with a particular parent for specific situations? (Do you feel more comfortable in dealing with certain situations with particular members of your family?) *(Teens and Parents)*

Parents and Teens preferred to talk to the same sex parent for issues:

- Bullying/ Teasing
- Sexual Assault/ Sexual Abuse (including STD and STI conversations)
- Poverty
- Divorce
- Dating

Parents and Teens preferred to talk to the opposite sex parent for issues:

- Alcohol
- Fights/Physical Aggression
- Divorce
- Dating

Do you feel comfortable with your current knowledge of technology? Do you feel comfortable asking a family member for help when you have a technology related question? *(Teens and Parents)*

Teens reported being very comfortable with technology, most of them listed more than three uses of technology per day- outside of school (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) Less than half of the parents listed themselves as comfortable with technology. Most of the parents listed themselves as emerging users. 52% of parents have never seen the information on
their teens Facebook site, 26% of the parents that look at their teens Facebook do not look more than once a month.

There is irritation when differing views are expressed in my family. Our family has created a system to deal with these situations. (Teens and Parents)

62% of the respondents reported irritation at differing views being expressed in the families. 88% reported ignoring the issue as the system to deal with the differences.

I feel my family bonds are strong and healthy. I seek support from my family. (Teens and Parents)

Teens reported a desire to talk to parents and close family members in situation where they need information or advice. Parents felt they should be the first resource for information, Teens reported going to friends for information before going to parents.

Why not go to parents?

Fear of retribution-67%, Fear of disappointment- 12%, Fear of failure- 13%, Fear of ostracism-8%

Parents reported being open to conversations with their teens about sensitive topics and said retributive behaviors would not be considered in the communication. Most parents reported they would rather be called in the middle of the night to pick up a drunk teenager from a party, than the hospital after an accident. Parents reported a willingness to act as the “step-in” parent for other families.