

Public Abstract

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Ph.D.

Communication

Parent/Child Distal Relationships: A Look at Communication Used Before, During, and After a Parental Absence

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This project examined communication in distal parent-child relationships. Distal relationships are relations in which people are physically separated for a period of time. Little research has focused on distal relationships, but they are a common form of family relationship, and often have considerable impact on all family members. In this study, the focus was families which had a parent leave their partner and child(ren) for 2 months or longer. The study investigated uncertainty reduction and uncertainty management among family members, using systems theory as a general framework for analysis. Participants were 54 parents and children from families who had a parent separated by incarceration or military deployment. Participants were interviewed individually about their experiences within 2 years of the parent's return. Results showed that families who communicated about the absence before departure had less of a negative impact on children's well-being. In addition, this study advances maintenance and uncertainty literature by illustrating that these participants maintained their relationships while the parent was absent by using a set of communication strategies and by managing their emotional climate with three closeness techniques and three distancing techniques. Results illustrated that the return home of the parent was often difficult with issues pertaining to responsibilities, regaining trust, and role changes. The findings in this study have implications for research on communication and meaning, regulating closeness and distance in relationships, and use of relational maintenance behaviors. The findings both support and add to previous research done on personal and family relationships.