

TURNING POINTS

# How Covid-19 Lockdowns Have Boosted Mother- Daughter Bonds

Some relationships have deepened in the American family during the pandemic, a broad survey suggests; 'We got so much closer'

Tara Cook-Littman and her 15-year-old daughter, Ava, have spent more time together during the pandemic. JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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By [Clare Ansberry](#)

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**Instead of going** to summer camp this year, Ava Littman hiked on trails with her mother, Tara Cook-Littman, listening to stories about her mom’s childhood and opening up about how much she missed her friends.

“We got so much closer.” says Ms. Cook-Littman. With her days free of driving to school and sporting events and doing advocacy work, she had time to teach 15-year-old Ava how to make smoothies and watch movies like “Pretty in Pink” with her.

Ava shares similar feelings: “I’ve learned a lot more about her,” she says of her mother.

The pandemic has tightened ties within many families that, like it or not, have been confined to the same house for months. Of the parent-child relationships, a deepening of the bond between mothers and daughters during this time stands out, according to recent research involving a survey of 500 mothers with children ages 10-20.

### A Special Relationship

In a survey during the pandemic, a strengthening of bonds between mothers and daughters stood out.

Which relationship in my family is flourishing the most?

Mother and daughter

63%

Mother and son

18

Father and daughter

12

Father and son

8

The relationship between mother and daughter in my family is becoming:

More connected

61

Less connected

6

About the same

34

Note: Figures do not add to 100% due to rounding

Source: Grant McCracken, 551 (flourishing) and 524 (becoming) U.S. mothers with with a daughter living at home ages 10 -20, conducted online June 2020.

More than 60% of the mothers surveyed said relationships with their daughters were flourishing during the pandemic.

Only 18% identified the mother-son relationship as the one thriving the most.

“At the heart of the Covid-19 experience is a shift in the American family, especially in the relationship between mothers and daughters,” says Grant McCracken, an anthropologist and consultant who specializes in American culture and conducted the research.

As part of his project, which hasn't been published, Dr. McCracken, interviewed 50 parents, mainly mothers, over an eight-week period this summer and then followed up with the broader online survey. In the interviews, mothers talked about

having a second chance with college-age daughters who had returned home, and “feeling less clueless” as teen daughters invited them into the world of TikTok videos. “I listen so much better,” said one.

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*Has your mother-daughter relationship changed during the pandemic? Join the conversation below.*

Even though daughters often rebel in their teens and pull away when they go to college, they want to be close to their moms, says SuEllen Hamkins, a psychiatrist who counsels college students and specializes in mother-daughter relationships.

“In some ways, we’re seeing the return to the kind of closeness one might expect between two people who really love each other and are in close proximity,” says Dr. Hamkins, who works at the University of Massachusetts- Amherst. “It doesn’t mean every single second is great. They all get sick of it.”

Mothers tend to monitor the feelings of all family members to make sure everyone is OK, says Dr. McCracken. During the pandemic, daughters, who are often better at expressing their feelings, [felt more lonely](#) and many mothers responded by trying to lift their spirits and keep them company.

Boys, who can be harder to engage, [often went to their bedrooms and basements and played video games](#), and were less likely to report feeling lonely, Dr. McCracken says. “They had a built-in social network that took them out of the family center and made them less visible.”

The falling away of work commutes and cancellations of kids’ activities have increased connection all around for many. “I spent more time with all three of them,” says Kerry Searle Grannis, of Annandale, Va., who has two sons and a

daughter. On a typical pre-pandemic Saturday, she would be driving one son to diving classes, another to Latin competition and her daughter to art classes. “If you are home and not as distracted, you can examine relationships and patterns more intentionally and notice things you didn’t see before,” says Ms. Searle Grannis, deputy executive vice president at the Brookings Institution.



Kerry Searle Grannis and her children, Amelia, Owen, and Nathaniel, this summer. ‘I’ve spent more time with all three of them,’ she says.

PHOTO: KERRY SEARLE GRANNIS

The pandemic can amplify conditions that already existed, says Julia Munson, a Denver-based psychotherapist and life coach. If the mother-daughter relationship was strong before the pandemic, it tends to get stronger, she says. “If it was rocky before it hit, power struggles can become even more

intense.” One young woman who couldn’t wait to leave home for college had to return to her mom’s home and rules. “It only lasted a week,” says Ms. Munson, who conducts workshops for mothers and daughters. “She couldn’t stand it, and her mother couldn’t stand it.” The daughter moved in with her father and stepmother.

Age can make a difference in tightening bonds. Ms. Cook-Littman says Ava, at 15, was ready for a closer relationship. “She could process what was going on and express her feelings,” she says.

Ava missed grandparents, aunts and uncles who live nearby. “She told me how she felt in a way she never did before,” says Ms. Cook-Littman. Ava saw friends in video chats, “but I think there were times when she needed her mom.”

When Ava said she wanted to eat healthier foods and exercise more, her mom gave her cooking tips in their Fairfield, Conn., home and suggested taking walks. “We did little things together,” Ava says. “When she would ask who wants to come to the farmers market with her, normally I would be the only one to go with her.”



“We got so much closer.” says Ms. Cook-Littman., with Ava in their Fairfield, Conn., home.

PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

During those times together, Ava heard new family history. Her mother attended the same high school, and described what it was like then. Ava also found out that her mother as a child went to the same beach house where they spent time this summer. “If things weren’t the way they were, we wouldn’t have talked as much about random stuff,” she says.

Karen Lee Petrovich, an in-home caregiver for older adults in Pittsburgh, watched the pandemic eclipse some of the biggest moments in her daughter Julia’s young life: her 18th birthday, her last high school musical, her prom, and graduation. By mid summer, Julia had packed all her boxes for college and was ready to go when she received word from Edinboro University that in-person classes were cancelled.

“It was the final blow,” says Ms. Petrovich, adding that she cried more than her daughter did. Knowing how much these milestones meant to her when she was a high-school senior, she went out of her way to cheer her up, organizing family walks and special dinners. For Julia’s 18th birthday, she ordered balloons and a favorite almond torte cake. When Julia and her 16-year-old sister, Sarah, found recipes on [Pinterest](#) for strawberry brownies and Big Mac sliders, they gathered in the kitchen.



Karen Lee Petrovich and her daughter Julia, who graduated from high school this year.

PHOTO: SARAH PETROVICH

“I feel like I spent a lot of time with Julia, more so than Sarah, because of all the things going on in Julia’s life,” says Ms. Petrovich. “Sarah wanted to help me keep Julia’s spirits up. We’re all closer.”

Julia is grateful. “I have friends who didn’t know what to do and feel because their parents were not as supportive,” she says. “It hit them a lot harder.”

Ms. Petrovich feels sad that her daughter couldn’t go away to college. “Selfishly though, it gave me a little more time to spend with her,” she says. “I have her here instead of on Facetime.”

## **Life Lessons**

Tips for mothers and their older daughters from Julia Munson, a Denver-based psychotherapist and life coach

**Be responsible:** Both mothers and daughters are responsible for healthy relationships. Eliminate blame.

**Appreciate:** Healthy relationships thrive when there is a ratio of 5:1 — five appreciations for every one criticism or complaint.

**Listen generously:** Eliminate filters, such as “I am listening to fix you as opposed to listening to understand you.”

**Set boundaries:** Clarify what topics are off limits, what levels of privacy each require and how to respond each other’s personal space.

**Request, not complain:** Behind every complaint is something that a person hasn’t asked for.

**Build trust:** Do what you say you will do.

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