Can AI Be a Good Assistant in Parent-Child Communication? A Comparison Between AI- and Human-Generated Responses

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Abstract

This study aimed to compare the effectiveness and appropriateness of AI-generated feedback versus human-generated feedback in parent-child communication. In a scenario-based survey, 103 college students evaluated responses from both ChatGPT and humans to a situation in which a teenage girl asked her parents to buy a mini skirt they considered too short. The scenario and human responses were developed by a focus group comprising two professors with expertise in interpersonal communication and a team of 20 college students. Participants (Median age = 23.2; 23% male, 77% female) rated the responses on five dimensions: honesty, competence, politeness, appropriateness, and supportiveness. The results from repeated-measures t-tests indicated that human responses were rated as more honest (t = 4.169, p < .001) and competent (t = 2.42, p < .05) compared to AI responses, while AI-generated feedback was viewed as more supportive (t = -5.265, p < .001). Both human and AI responses were considered equally polite and appropriate. Overall, the study extends our understanding of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which examines how people manage face (self-image) in communication, especially during face-threatening acts like criticism. While AI may offer supportive feedback, humans are perceived as more honest and competent, especially in situations requiring nuanced judgment. The study suggests AI can be a useful supplementary tool for parents—offering advice, suggesting strategies, and providing consistent feedback when humans may be too busy or emotionally charged. These results may inform educational programs to improve parent communication skills and guide the development of AI tools to support parent-child interactions.

Keywords: parent-child communication, AI, communication effectiveness

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Introduction

Parent–adolescent communication is a cornerstone of healthy family functioning, yet it is often fraught with challenges. As adolescents seek greater autonomy and develop their identities, parents may struggle to balance emotional support with behavioral control, frequently resulting in miscommunication and conflict (Smetana, 2011). Everyday conversations—particularly those involving values, appearance, or independence—can become emotionally charged, making effective communication difficult (Laursen & Collins, 2009). These tensions are further exacerbated by generational differences in language use, social norms, and expectations, which may undermine mutual understanding (Steinberg, 2001). Despite good intentions, parents may come across as critical or dismissive, while adolescents may perceive guidance as authoritarian or unsupportive.

Communication breakdowns are particularly likely during "face-threatening acts"—interactions in which an individual's autonomy or self-image is perceived to be at risk (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness theory underscores the importance of managing "face" through communicative strategies that minimize interpersonal tension and preserve relational harmony. In emotionally sensitive parent–child interactions, the ability to deliver feedback that is perceived as honest, competent, and supportive is crucial—yet often elusive.

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) offer novel opportunities to support family communication. Large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT can generate context-sensitive, emotionally attuned responses that align with interpersonal goals, including empathy, politeness, and clarity (Xu & Shi, 2024). Although AI lacks genuine emotional understanding, its capacity to offer consistent, neutral, and measured responses may assist parents who feel overwhelmed or emotionally reactive in difficult conversations. Early evidence suggests that AI-generated messages may be perceived as polite and supportive in interpersonal contexts (Zhou et al., 2023), though concerns remain about their authenticity and appropriateness in complex, value-laden scenarios (Cervone et al., 2024).

This study investigates how AI-generated feedback compares with human responses in a parent–adolescent disagreement about appearance—an emotionally charged context likely to elicit face threats. Using a scenario-based survey, we evaluated perceptions of honesty, competence, politeness, appropriateness, and supportiveness through the lens of politeness theory. The goal is to identify the respective strengths and limitations of human and AI responses and to explore the potential of AI tools to aid parents in navigating emotionally sensitive conversations with adolescents.

Literature Review

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory, developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals manage social interactions by attending to "face"—the public self-image people seek to uphold. The theory distinguishes between positive face (the desire to be liked and accepted) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). These concerns are particularly salient in parent–adolescent interactions, where adolescents seek independence while remaining embedded within family structures (Goldsmith, 2007).

Research shows that parental communication that threatens adolescents' negative face—such as direct commands or criticism—can provoke resistance, conflict, or withdrawal (Miller-Ott et al., 2014). Conversely, politeness strategies such as hedging, indirectness, or collaborative phrasing (e.g., "Let's talk about…" or "How do you feel about…") may encourage dialogue and maintain relational harmony (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). As adolescents grow more sensitive to social norms and identity negotiation, they may interpret face-threatening messages as dismissive or controlling, influencing their willingness to communicate openly (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Thus, politeness theory sheds light on the relational strategies that facilitate or hinder communication during this pivotal developmental stage.

Challenges in Parent–Adolescent Communication

Several recurring challenges complicate parent–adolescent communication. One key issue is topic avoidance—adolescents are less likely to disclose information about sexuality, mental health, or risky behaviors when they perceive parents as judgmental or punitive (Jaccard et al., 2002).

A related issue is the privacy-monitoring dilemma. Adolescents seek greater privacy and autonomy, while parents often feel compelled to monitor behavior for safety. Stattin and Kerr (2000) found that adolescent voluntary disclosure—rather than parental surveillance—is more predictive of positive developmental outcomes, and that disclosure flourishes in climates of trust and respect.

Another common difficulty is conflict escalation. Disagreements are not inherently harmful, but unmanaged conflict can erode trust and strain relationships (Adams & Laursen, 2007). Cultural and generational differences, especially in immigrant families, can further hinder understanding. Divergent norms surrounding emotional expression, authority, and respect may contribute to misinterpretations and frustration (Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Parenting style also plays a significant role. Authoritative parenting—marked by warmth and firm boundaries—has been consistently linked to more constructive communication outcomes (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Family structure and external stressors such as divorce, financial hardship, or remarriage may also disrupt parent–adolescent communication (Amato, 2000).

Nevertheless, research identifies strategies to improve interactions. These include active listening, timely conversations tailored to developmental readiness, and low-pressure daily communication to build closeness (Ackard et al., 2006; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). Parental warmth and respect for autonomy have been shown to increase voluntary disclosure and foster stronger relationships (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013).

AI as a Potential Aid in Communication

AI is rapidly transforming human interaction by enhancing clarity, accessibility, and personalisation. Tools such as ChatGPT, emotion recognition software, and real-time translators are reshaping interpersonal and cross-cultural communication.

Recent research highlights AI's potential in improving communication across domains. ChatGPT and similar tools offer real-time feedback, clarify misunderstandings, and help

bridge generational or cultural divides (Wang & Liang, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). In professional contexts, AI can assist with email drafting, summarizing interactions, and supporting strategic messaging (Lu et al., 2023). AI has also shown promise in supporting neurodiverse individuals and those with social anxiety by creating low-pressure environments for practicing communication (Lee & Qiu, 2022).

However, concerns remain. Although AI can simulate empathy and politeness, it lacks emotional awareness and often misinterprets subtle cues like sarcasm or cultural references (Gunkel, 2023; Nass & Moon, 2000). While AI may enhance emotionally sensitive conversations, it should complement—not replace—human intuition and relational judgment.

Research Question

RQ1: Are human-generated responses perceived as more effective than AI-generated responses in emotionally sensitive parent–adolescent communication?

Method

Scenario Development and Survey Structure

A focus group of two professors in interpersonal communication and 20 college students collaboratively developed the following scenario:

> A teenage girl is passionate about fashion and enjoys experimenting with different styles. Recently, she's taken a liking to a mini skirt at a local store. However, her parents disapprove, believing it is too short for her. If you were the parent, what would you say to your daughter?

The focus group created a human-generated parental response (Parent A):

> I know you're at an age where you want to express yourself through fashion, and as your parent, I support your passion. But you have to be mindful of the world we live in—it's full of people who might take advantage of pretty girls like you. The mini skirt isn't age-appropriate just yet. If you insist on wearing it, please wear long biker shorts underneath. You must remain aware and cautious of your surroundings.

The identical scenario was input into ChatGPT, which generated the AI response (Parent B):

> Hey sweetie, I know you're really into fashion and love experimenting with different looks, and I admire your creativity and confidence. However, I do feel a bit concerned about the mini skirt. It's important for you to feel comfortable and confident in what you wear, but I also want you to consider how certain styles might make you feel—or be perceived—in different situations. Maybe we can find a balance that lets you express yourself while still feeling confident and appropriate for different occasions? How about we look for something stylish that also makes you feel your best?

Participants and Procedure

A total of 103 college students at a medium-sized university in the southwestern United States participated. Participants (77% female, 23% male) ranged from 18 to 53 years old (M

= 23.2). Ethnic composition was 48% Caucasian, 25% Hispanic, 17% African American, and 7% Asian. Most were juniors (36%) or seniors (41%). Participants read the scenario and rated the effectiveness of both responses across five communication dimensions.

Measures

Scales developed by Edwards, Bello, and colleagues were used to evaluate perceived effectiveness in five domains: **supportiveness**, **politeness**, **honesty**, **competence**, and **appropriateness** (Bello & Edwards, 2005; Edwards & Bello, 2001). **Supportiveness** was assessed with two items (e.g., "Parent A was trying to protect the daughter's feelings"). **Politeness** was measured using four items (e.g., "Parent B was polite"; "Parent B was rude" [reverse coded]). **Honesty** was assessed with five items (e.g., "Parent A was willing to speak his/her mind"). **Competence** was measured using four items (e.g., "Parent B was good at expressing thoughts"). **Appropriateness** was evaluated with seven items adapted from the Conversational Appropriateness Scale (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1990), such as "Everything Parent A said was appropriate." All scales demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .81 to .93. (See Table 1 for means and SDs)

Table 1
Variable Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities

	Human Responses *M* (*SD*)	*AI Responses* *M* (*SD*)
Supportiveness	5.48 (1.15)	6.19 (1.02)
Competence	5.91 (1.05)	5.57 (1.26)
Appropriateness	5.87 (1.12)	5.82 (1.19)
Honesty	6.29 (.74)	5.83 (1.19)
Politeness	6.05 (.89)	6.15 (.94)

Results

Results from repeated-measures t-tests revealed significant differences in participants' evaluations of the human-generated versus AI-generated responses. Specifically, **Human responses (Parent A)** were rated as more **honest** *($t = 4.17$, $p < .001$)* and more **competent** *($t = 2.42$, $p < .05$)*. **AI-generated responses (Parent B)** were perceived as more **supportive** *($t = -5.27$, $p < .001$)*. Both human and AI responses were considered equally polite and appropriate.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how college students evaluated the effectiveness of AI-generated versus human-generated parental responses in a parent–adolescent disagreement over appearance. Drawing on politeness theory, we explored participants' perceptions of the responses across five dimensions: honesty, competence, politeness, appropriateness, and supportiveness. The

results provide insight into how message source (human or AI) influences the perceived quality of communication in emotionally sensitive parent–child contexts.

The AI-generated response (Parent B) was rated significantly higher in supportiveness, suggesting that participants viewed the message as more emotionally affirming and empathetic. This aligns with research indicating that AI language models like ChatGPT excel at generating emotionally attuned and positively framed messages (Zhou et al., 2023). Parent B's use of affirmations ("I admire your creativity and confidence") and open-ended, collaborative phrasing ("How about we look for something stylish…") likely contributed to this perception, as such strategies support the adolescent's positive face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In contrast, the human-generated response (Parent A) was perceived as significantly more honest and competent. This suggests that while AI responses may offer greater emotional warmth, human responses may be seen as more forthright and credible. The human response was more direct in its concern ("You must remain aware and cautious of your surroundings") and provided concrete behavioral guidance (e.g., wearing biker shorts underneath). These elements likely enhanced the message's perceived sincerity and effectiveness in boundary-setting—an essential component of parental authority and adolescent safety.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the responses in perceived politeness or appropriateness. This may indicate that both messages adhered to basic standards of respectful communication, even though they differed in tone and delivery. This finding also underscores the increasing sophistication of AI-generated language, which can now emulate human-like politeness strategies with surprising accuracy.

Together, these findings highlight a key trade-off in AI-assisted communication: while AI may enhance warmth and reduce interpersonal tension through positive politeness strategies, it may fall short in conveying authenticity, authority, or firm guidance—qualities that are particularly salient in parent–child dynamics involving safety, values, or behavioral boundaries.

These results also raise theoretical considerations regarding politeness theory. Brown and Levinson's framework assumes that communicators are strategic agents with relational histories and social motivations. In contrast, AI lacks both agency and context-awareness, relying instead on pattern recognition and statistical likelihood. Yet, participants still evaluated the AI message using the same interpersonal criteria as human communication. This finding supports emerging arguments that people apply social expectations and relational heuristics even to non-human agents (Nass & Moon, 2000). Future theoretical work might explore how perceived "intent" or "authorship" mediates face evaluations when messages come from AI sources.

Additionally, the differential ratings across message dimensions suggest that people compartmentalize their evaluations: AI can be perceived as emotionally supportive without being fully trusted, while humans may be trusted more, even when their messages feel less emotionally comforting. This nuance is critical for understanding how AI can be integrated into communication support tools without undermining relational authenticity.

From a practical perspective, these findings hold relevance for both family communication and the integration of AI tools in parenting support contexts. As AI platforms like ChatGPT

become increasingly accessible, some parents may consider using them for guidance in crafting difficult conversations with their children. While AI can provide supportive, emotionally intelligent language, human judgment appears to remain essential for conveying messages perceived as honest and competent—qualities especially important in boundary-setting and values-based discussions.

For educators and practitioners working with families, these results suggest a nuanced approach: AI may assist in *drafting* or *framing* conversations with a more supportive tone, but should not replace parental authenticity or contextual sensitivity. Training programs in family communication could incorporate AI as a tool to model politeness strategies or enhance parental empathy, but ultimately emphasize the irreplaceable role of human insight and credibility.

While the present study offers valuable insights into how AI- and human-generated parental responses are perceived in a parent–adolescent communication context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study utilized a hypothetical scenario and asked participants—primarily college students—to evaluate pre-written responses rather than engage in real-time conversations. This design limits ecological validity, as it does not capture the nuances of ongoing interpersonal exchanges or how participants might respond emotionally and behaviorally in an actual parent–child conflict. Future research should consider interactive, multi-turn dialogue simulations or real-life experimental settings to better assess the dynamics of AI-assisted communication over time.

Another limitation lies in the participant sample. The data were collected exclusively from college students, who may be more familiar with and receptive to AI-generated language than younger adolescents or parents. As such, their evaluations may not fully represent how AI responses would be interpreted by the broader population involved in parent–child interactions. Future studies should incorporate perspectives from both adolescents and parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how AI is received and how its messages affect both parties' perceptions and behaviors. Additionally, expanding the demographic scope to include individuals from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and family structures would enrich the generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, the study did not account for participants' prior experiences with AI, which may influence their perceptions of message quality and authenticity. Individuals who frequently use AI tools like ChatGPT might evaluate AI-generated responses more favorably than those unfamiliar with such technologies. Future research should explore how prior exposure, technological literacy, and trust in AI shape users' acceptance of AI-mediated communication in family contexts.

The study also raises important questions about cultural and contextual variability. Parent–child communication norms vary widely across cultures, and what is considered supportive or appropriate in one context may not be perceived the same way in another. Given this cultural diversity, future research should examine how AI-generated responses are interpreted in various sociocultural settings and whether AI language models can be effectively adapted to reflect local norms and values. Culturally sensitive AI design and evaluation are essential if such technologies are to be integrated meaningfully into global parenting resources.

Finally, the broader implications of incorporating AI into parent–child communication deserve further exploration. While AI may enhance emotional support and politeness in

sensitive conversations, it is essential to understand its long-term effects on family relationships and communication development. Longitudinal studies could help determine whether AI fosters genuine empathy and conflict resolution skills or encourages overreliance on external tools at the expense of direct human interaction. Designers and researchers should also consider how AI systems can support, rather than substitute, authentic connection—ensuring that such technologies augment rather than erode the human dimensions of family life.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

ChatGPT 4.0 was used for proofreading this manuscript.

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