

# Communication Between Chinese Parents and Children: Apology Should be Given from Parents for Invading Children's Privacy

Xianlan Li<sup>1,a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Communication University of China, Beijing, China

<sup>a</sup>chunchenxiao@cas-harbour.org

**Keywords:** Privacy, Apology, Family communication

**Abstract.** Peeping teenagers secrets, such as a diary, is a disrespectful but common way for Chinese parents who want to take care and raise their children. Another serious problem is that they hardly apologize for it. The paper focuses on the behavior that parents invade teenagers' privacy and their apology to solve the terrible condition. A questionnaire survey is done. Also, according to the results, the paper analyzes the problem in Chinese family communication.

## 1. Introduction

It's common that teenagers always keep private space that do not want to share with their parents, like keeping a diary, or hiding stars' posters in their closets. Maybe feel embarrassing or maybe afraid to be blamed by parents, teenagers keep their secrets as their privacy. People feel bad when their privacy are invaded by others, especially invaded by people who they directly hide from. Therefore, to teenagers, the most terrible situation about teenagers' secrets is that they are found by their parents. Considering showing understand and respect to teenagers, and the moral principle that one should not invade others' privacy, the behavior that peep teenagers' secrets, which is done by parents, is definitely wrong.

However, in some cases, parents believe that they have rights to checking their children's secret, especially in Asia, in China, which culture and concept of family was set based on agricultural civilization and tradition. Some parents hold the view that they are peeping their children's secret in a good purpose—they want to understand their children more, take more care of their children, and improve the communication between parents and children. They have the rights to viewing teenagers' diary because they are their parents and have the duty to take care of them. However, contrarily, when finding that their own privacy are invaded by their parents, teenagers will be angry and distance their parents. The distance between parents and children is harmful to the relationship, not to mention improving the communication.

A further controversial issue is that Chinese parents always refuse to apologize for peeping their children's secret. The basic reason is that they think they have rights to check it. What's more, though some parents assert that they understand and respect their teenagers, regarding them as adults, they do not want to show that they are at the lower status than their children in such situation. Although apology promote justice and fairness[1], admitting the fairness in the family means they will lose the rights to supervise their teenagers. Of course, most parents insist to supervise their children not to make themselves happy, but in order to caring their children and taking responsibility of them. According to their life experience, which is definitely more than their children's, they believe they have the power to educate, to supervise their children and make them thrive.

In this way, the communication between Chinese parents and their adolescent children become a complicated issue. Through peeping teenagers' privacy without apologize to them, showing their power in family, parents seems know about their teenagers more and become more closer to their teenagers' life. However, contrarily, they are actually creating distance between parents and teenagers and make the condition of communication more terrible. This paper aims to research this condition, present results of a survey, study the effect of invading privacy and apology and further more, discuss the communication and relationship between Chinese parents and teenagers.

## **2. The fact of apology between parents and children**

### **2.1 About parent's behavior that invading teenagers' privacy**

Although complicated issues are happening all around the world, we can keep a private space for ourselves to store the facts of us. It is true that privacy is every individual's right. However, sometimes parents do not regard teenagers as individuals because they believe their responsibility to educate them. They exhaust their efforts to make sure whether their children have something that conceal to them. Ledbetter and colleagues [2][3] discovered three ways in which emerging adults perceive their parents invade their privacy. First, parents engage in spatial invasions. This includes behaviors like entering their bedroom and searching their belongings. Second, parents engage in mediated invasions when they investigate their children's phone activity, eavesdrop on their phone calls, read their private e-mails/instant messages, and/or check up on their social networking activity [4], diary is included too. In these ways, parent feel comfortable, they feel they understand their children more and can control them better. The issue has some psychological aspects, but it is mostly impressed by how parents regarding their relationship with children: whether they trust their teenagers, and whether they think they have the ownership of their children's life. It is easy to confuse responsibility and ownership. Additionally, the behaviors after invading privacy are different: one is concealing the fact that they had seen them, but enhance the supervision; another is showing them to teenagers directly and talking to them. Sometimes the first behavior will not found by teenagers forever.

The condition in China is more serious. Before the idea of privacy and individual rights imported to China from western countries, there was not any clear concept and law about private space in ancient China. In addition, agricultural civilization formed the traditional status in families. In ancient China, young people would inherit their families' land, parents would educate their children to inherit land as well. Therefore, it is traditional that parents take all their children's responsibility, taking care of everything, while children should listen to everything gave by parents and be owned by parents. Although this tradition was broken with the change of structure of economy and the importation of western culture, some parents also believe their power as well as responsibility in family. Teenagers should show details about their life to them, helping them make sure they are good students. Some parents even hold the opinion that, teenagers should not conceal anything to them, unless they did something bad. It means keeping private space is equivalent to doing some bad thing and hiding it. They skeptically regard keeping private space as deception.

Privacy invasion appears to have the potential to be an important indicator of adolescents' negative reactions to parents' behaviors that limit adolescents' abilities to control access to information or personal spaces. Privacy invasion is strongly associated with psychological control. [5]

### **2.2 Apology that parents give to teenagers**

Apology is a relatively simple and low-cost strategy to amend conflicts and appears to be an effective way to resolve discord [6][7][8][9]. Apology provides its recipient with a reason to forgive a wrongdoer insofar as it answers resentment's normative expectation [10]. There is an assumption that in family, apology that parents to teenagers is more effective, since the unwritten rule in family is that parents are superior and have the rights to educate their children. Therefore, when parents apologize to teenagers, it means there are justice and fairness in the family and teenagers are mature enough to take their own responsibility. Through apologize, not only can parents stop the conflict, but also set up enlightened images for themselves. In fact, invading privacy is definitely wrong, so parents are supposed to apologize in this condition. Both supposed to do and will bring lots of positive effects, the best way for parents to solve such conflict is to apologize.

But some Chinese parents refuse to do it. The tradition of agricultural civilization dictated they think they are superior in the family, so apologizing to children is embarrassing. It is equivalent to saying that although I have more life experience than you, but I did not perform better than you in our family. It is difficult for them to say that. Also, some parents do not recognize that they did something wrong. They think it is a common behavior to understand their children by peeping their secrets, which is more real than ask teenagers about their life. They may even be moved by how much they

care their children without recognizing it as a fault. To them, it is just a part of educating, to make teenagers better people. And it is hard to spread the opinion that invading one's own children's privacy is disrespectful to every corner of China, especially rural places.

### **3. Research Method**

To find out the relationship between invading privacy, apologizing and communication between parents and teenagers, a survey was sent. The survey is divided into two independent questionnaire surveys. One is for Chinese teenagers and young adults who can recall the memory of their teenage, the other is for parents. 140 participants answered the first one, and 82 participants answered the second one. The questions and calculations of the survey are listed below.

#### **3.1 Questions and results from teenagers (and young adults)**

##### *3.1.1 Privacy*

1. Do you agree teenagers should have their privacy without sharing with their parents?  
Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (0%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (2.86%)/ Agree (37.14%)/ Strongly agree (60%)
2. Have you got some secrets (like keeping a diary) that were found by your parents in your teenage?  
Yes (74.29%)/ No (20% )/ I don't have secrets (5.71%)
3. Do you agree that, to parents, seeking their children's secrets is a way to take care of them?  
Strongly disagree (5.71%)/ Disagree (37.14%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (40%)/ Agree (14.29%)/ Strongly agree (2.86%)
4. Do you agree that, to parents, seeking their children's secrets is a kind of "fault"?  
Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (5%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (29.29%)/ Agree (50.71%)/ Strongly agree (15%)

##### *3.1.2 Apology*

1. Do you agree parents should apologize for seeking their children's secrets when their behaviors are found?  
Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (0%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (8.57%)/ Agree (60.71%)/ Strongly agree (30.71%)
2. Did your parents apologize for seeking your secrets?  
Yes, they apologized sincerely (16.43%)/ Yes, but not sincerely (11.43%)/ No (66.43%)/ I don't have secrets (5.71%)
3. Do you think their apology was effective enough?  
Yes (20%)/ No (20%)/ They didn't apologize (60%)
4. Do you agree such kind of conflict will end quickly even without apology?  
Strongly disagree (7.86%)/ Disagree (27.14)/ Neither disagree nor agree (45%)/ Agree (16.43%)/ Strongly agree (3.57%)

##### *3.1.3 Family communication*

1. Do you think the communication between your parents and you were sufficient in your teenage?  
Strongly disagree (14.29%)/ Disagree (30%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (23.57%)/ Agree (22.14%)/ Strongly agree (10%)
2. Do you think the communication should be improved?  
Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (9.29%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (30.71%)/ Agree (48.57%)/ Strongly agree (11.43%)
3. Do you agree parents should apologize for their behavior which purpose is to take care of their children?  
Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (2.14%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (26.43%)/ Agree (57.14%)/ Strongly agree (14.29%)
4. Do you agree the secret of children is important if the communication between parents and teenagers is insufficient?

Strongly disagree (5%)/ Disagree (39.29%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (22.86%)/ Agree (22.86%)/ Strongly agree (10%)

5. Do you think you are living in a harmonious family?

Strongly disagree (5.71%)/ Disagree (3.57%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (35%)/ Agree (41.43%)/ Strongly agree (14.29%)

### 3.2 Questions and results from parents

#### 3.2.1 Privacy

1. Do you agree teenagers should have their private space without sharing with their parents?

Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (10.98%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (24.39%)/ Agree (40.24%)/ Strongly agree (24.39%)

2. Do you agree that to keep a better relationship between parents and teenagers, parents should learn more about their children?

Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (2.44%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (26.83%)/ Agree (50%)/ Strongly agree (20.73%)

3. Do you think your child had some secrets in his/her teenage?

Yes (52.44%)/ No (18.29%)/ Unclear (29.27%)

4. Have you made your child angry because of his/her secrets?

Yes (35.37%)/ No (21.95%)/ Unclear (42.68%)

#### 3.2.2 Apology

1. Have you ever apologized to your child for invading his/ her private space?

Yes (43.90%)/ No (14.63%)/Unclear (41.46%)

2. Are there sometimes that you think you are right while your children think you are wrong?

Yes (47.56%)/ No (18.29%)/Unclear (34.15%)

3. Do you agree that offering a meal or purchasing some thing are more effective than apology in the communication in a family?

Strongly disagree (15.85%)/ Disagree (9.77%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (40.24%)/ Agree (18.29%)/ Strongly agree (15.85%)

4. Do you agree time will fix the conflicts in a family because you are a family?

Strongly disagree (9.77%)/ Disagree (18.29%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (23.17%)/ Agree (37.80%)/ Strongly agree (10.98%)

5. Would you apologize if your children ask you to do so without a reason you can understand?

Yes (30.40%)/ No (50%)/ Unclear (19.51%)

#### 3.2.3 Family communication

1. Do you think the communication between your child and you were sufficient in his/her teenage?

Strongly disagree (24.39%)/ Disagree (40.24%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (20.73%)/ Agree (19.51%)/ Strongly agree (17.07%)

2. Do you think the communication should be improved?

Strongly disagree (0%)/ Disagree (12.20%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (23.17%)/ Agree (42.68%)/ Strongly agree (21.95%)

3. Do you agree that children will grow better through parents' supervising?

Strongly disagree(1.22%)/ Disagree (12.20%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (14.63%)/ Agree (58.54%)/ Strongly agree (13.41%)

4. Do you agree the secret of children is important if the communication between parents and teenagers is insufficient?

Strongly disagree (4.88%)/ Disagree (23.17%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (14.63%)/ Agree (41.46%)/ Strongly agree (13.41%)

5. Do you think you are living in a harmonious family?

Strongly disagree (3.66%)/ Disagree (7.32%)/ Neither disagree nor agree (12.20%)/ Agree (46.34%)/ Strongly agree (30.49%)

#### **4. Discussion**

The result presented in the survey shows that most of Chinese teenagers' privacy was indeed invaded by their parent in their teenage. And they agreed that keeping secrets is the right of teenagers. Also, most of them realized the fact without receiving an apology (or an effective apology). It shows the common condition in most families in China. Most of teenagers regarded this behavior as a fault and angry with not receiving an apology, but they were still confused that whether peeping secrets are related to taking care.

Teenagers did not take position in whether time will solve conflicts between family members while most parents agreed with it, showing that one of the way that is always used to solve family problems, which maybe harmful to the relationship. Although some parents were ashamed to tell the truth or their true opinion, making the result of parents inexplicit, parents' answer clearly shows that they believe the more they knew about their teenager, the better the communication were. They seemed to agree keeping secrets, but they wanted to know more.

Another feature shows in the parents' answer is that many times they refuse to apologize to their children is because the lack of recognition of their fault. They think they are justice. And both teenagers and parents admitted that the communication in their family is insufficient and supposed to improve. It is true that through seeking for their secrets parents cannot achieve their purpose to understand their children more, but do something wrong and bring conflict to the family.

Additionally, it is interesting that most parents believed that secrets are results of insufficient communication while teenagers believed they happen naturally (and invading privacy deteriorate the communication). Although conflict of opinion is presented, it is clear that both teenagers and parents intended to improve family communication and create a better environment. So, the problem is what mentioned before, Chinese parents believe they have the responsibility to supervise their children, and they refuse to say sorry for the same reason.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Families likely struggle to balance parents' desire to stay informed of adolescents' whereabouts and activities with adolescents' desire for privacy.[5] Also, apologize is an effective way to allay this struggle and promote communication.

Through result in the survey, it is obvious that in China, teenagers' privacy is always invaded by their parents, and there are lots of difference between teenagers' and parents' opinion of family relationship and how to build a child. Parents pay more attention to find out what their children are thinking about to show they are caring of them, the respect to their children is ignored. The absence of effective apology is a serious problem in those families too. Chinese parents' belief that they are superior in the family relationship makes them cannot realize their disrespect and unwilling to apologize, which seems they lose their superiority. They believe that secrets are just products of insufficient communication and teenagers will grow better under supervising. Lacking cognize of their fault, they will not have the awareness to apologize. And apologizing is too ashamed to them. They are always confused why their teenagers ask them to apologize. Some of them give a halfhearted reply as an apology, which is ineffective, according to teenagers.

Such heavy care that people in higher status give to lower status make the communication more difficult. Pay so much attention to how to take care of teenagers without showing respect extends the distance of parents' and teenagers' spiritual world. The condition that both parents and teenagers are not satisfied with the communication is caused. To make the distance shorter they should regard teenagers as equal people to them and apologize sincerely if do something wrong. Mentioned before, apology is a low-cost strategy to amend conflicts and can show justice and fairness in the family. Contradicted some parents tend to perform perfect and take all the responsibility of building teenagers, some private space and some "faults" (recognition and apology for their faults, instead of a perfect image that refuse to admit faults) is necessary. To improve family communication, such factors should be considered.

## References

- [1] De Cremer, D., & Schouten, B. C. (2008). When apologies for injustice matter, the role of respect. *European Psychologist*, 13, 239–247.
- [2] Ledbetter, A. M., Heiss, S., Sibal, K., Lev, E., Battle-Fisher, & Shubert, N. (2010). Parental invasive and children's defensive behaviors at home and away at college: Mediated communication and privacy boundary management. *Communication Studies*, 61, 184–204. doi:10.1080/105109710036039
- [3] Ledbetter, A. M., & Vik, T. A. (2012). Parental invasive behaviors and emerging adults' privacy defenses: Instrument development and validation. *Journal of Family Communication*, 12, 227–247.
- [4] Carrie D. Kennedy-Lightsey & Brandi N. Frisby . (2016) Parental Privacy Invasion, Family Communication Patterns, and Perceived Ownership of Private Information. *Communication Reports*, Vol. 29, 75–86
- [5] Robert D. Laird\*, Matthew D. Marrero, Jessica Melching, Emily S. Kuhn. (2013) Brief report: Improving the validity of assessments of adolescents' feelings of privacy invasion. *Journal of Adolescence* 36 (2013) 227–231
- [6] Baron, R. A. (1990). Countering the effects of destructive criticism: The relative efficacy of four interventions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75, 235– 245.
- [7] Darby, B. W., & Schlenker, B. R. (1982). Children's reactions to apologies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 742–753.
- [8] Folkes, V. S., & Whang, Y. O. (2003). Account-giving for a corporate trans- gression influences moral judgment: When those who “spin” condone harm- doing. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88, 79–86.
- [9] Frantz, C. M., & Bennis, C. (2005). Better late than early: The influence of timing on apology effectiveness. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 201–207.
- [10] Adrienne M. Martin (2010) Owing up and lowering down: the power of apology. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 107, No. 10, 534-553
- [11] Tamar Walfisch, Dina Van Dijk, Ronit Kark (2013). Do you really expect me to apologize? The impact of status and gender on the effectiveness of an apology in the workplace. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43, 1446–1458