


School and family ecosystem: Incentives and barriers to school–family communication

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the factors and barriers related to the incentive and opportunity of school–family communication. This work is part of the HOUSE-Colégio F3 Project, ULisbon, which included 1,143 first-year university students from the University of Lisbon, with average age of 19.61 ± 3.96 years. The young people who had better communication with their parents, greater family support and better family relationship were the ones who reported greater incentives for school–family communication. School–family communication and relationship were associated with the incentives for school–family communication and greater parental monitoring. These results align

with the literature stating that parents' communication and presence in all areas of young people's lives, including the school context, foster better social and family relationships and academic results. This result should not be read as a call for non-autonomy. Instead, it highlights that monitoring and supporting family presence promotes that autonomy.

KEYWORDS

school ecosystem, school-family communication, school-family relationship, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

From an ecological perspective, individuals are constantly interacting with the various environments in which they live. Therefore, individuals can be influenced by the relationships established between the immediate and broader social contexts. The interrelationships between the different contexts are likely to influence and be influenced by individuals. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the interactions between the individual, the different contexts and the other people present in these contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1994; Gaspar et al., 2020; Matos, 2020, 2022).

The family is one of the contexts that plays an essential role in the development of children and young people, including those in higher education. Thus, the quality of family relationships and communication constitutes an impact factor regarding the well-being of young people (Guedes et al., 2022; Yubero et al., 2018). Family functioning has also emerged in the literature as a factor related to young people's school involvement and motivation (Harris et al., 2020; Stubbs & Maynard, 2017). A more positive family environment constitutes a facilitator element for the involvement of parents in their children's activities, promoting a more significant support structure for their learning and academic performance (Xia et al., 2016).

Parental involvement and communication between parents and children (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009) have been highlighted in the literature among other important family factors that can influence the well-being of children and young people (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009; Guedes et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2012). On the one hand, greater parental involvement is associated with better communication and relationships with children and more positive attitudes towards their teachers (Baker et al., 2016). On the other hand, good communication between the school and the family is essential to parental involvement in this context (Lyubitskaya & Shakarova, 2018). Also, parental involvement tends to be beneficial regarding academic results and success, to help parents and teachers adjust responses to students' needs (i.e., through the exchange of information) and to promote the relationship between parents and teachers (LaRocque et al., 2011).

Young people go through different stages in their development, which influences their interpersonal relationships, academic performance and involvement. Social environments that are more sensitive and adjusted to these changes tend to foster better development and adaptation results in children and adolescents, and school emerges as one of the most fundamental contexts in this regard (Eccles et al., 1993).

The feeling of belonging experienced at the school level is related to students' psychosocial well-being. A school environment that is too focused on academic indicators and results and less on the importance of the relationship between teachers and students tends to negatively affect the well-being and performance of both young people and teachers (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020; Matos & Wainwright, 2021). Also, communication and interactions between parents and teachers play an essential role in the development of young people, their psychosocial

well-being and academic performance (Baker et al., 2016; Chen, 2019; Garreta, 2014; Matos & Wainwright, 2021; Willemse et al., 2018).

Family and school are two fundamental contexts in the lives of young people, and the existence of collaborative work between both environments may enhance students' psychosocial development (Baker et al., 2016; Guedes et al., 2022, 2023; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). A good understanding of the features and dynamics of family context may promote greater proximity between the school and the family (Tanase, 2022).

The family and school environment (as well as the peer group) may act as risk or protective factors for the psychosocial development of young people (Levin et al., 2012; Mihić et al., 2022). For instance, support from parents and teachers (and peers) promotes children and adolescents' academic involvement and success (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Therefore, establishing a good relationship between the family and the school is vital to meet children's and young people's needs (Graham-Clay, 2005). The existence of partnerships and joint work between the family and the school is fundamental for the education and development of young people. This connection may contribute to a more positive environment, support parents, promote skills among parents and families and bring families and the community closer together. In addition, the school-family relationship also promotes the success of young people, not only academically but also in their adult life (Epstein, 1995).

To respond to the needs of young people, parents, teachers and the school community must join forces and communicate effectively (LaRocque et al., 2011). Therefore, one of the fundamental aspects concerning the involvement of parents in the school is the communication between the school and the family (Epstein, 1995; Graham-Clay, 2005). This type of communication is a subject that has received considerable attention in the literature and has emerged as related to the level of support and parental involvement existing in families since this is reflected in the performance and results obtained by students (Chen, 2019; Daniel, 2015; Sağkal, 2019; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2012).

In this sense, this study intends to explore the factors that may influence communication between the school and the family and the barriers that may hinder this communication. Therefore, family-related variables (e.g., communication with parents, family support, parental monitoring and the quality of family relationships) and school-related variables (e.g., relationships with teachers and colleagues) were analysed. In addition, this study also intended to investigate the association between young people's communication with their parents and the incentives for school-family communication and relationship compared with the other variables under study.

2 | METHOD

This work is part of the Project HOUSE-Colégio F3, ULisbon, promoted by Colégio F3, University of Lisbon. This College comprises a group of Professors and Researchers from all 18 Faculties and Institutes of the University of Lisbon. It promotes the adoption of interdisciplinary attitudes and aims to reinforce national and international visibility by developing research and differentiated education.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns about the health status of first-year students at the University of Lisbon. Therefore, the opportunity arose to develop this study to understand and explore the health profile and lifestyles of first-year students at the University mentioned above. 17 of the 18 Faculties and Institutes of the University of Lisbon participated in this study. The House-Colégio F3 study allowed me to develop and include questions related to my area of expertise (i.e., questions related to the school and family ecosystem and incentives and barriers to school-family communication) using the autobiographical memories method (Bauer, 2015; Hung & Bryant, 2016; Nóvoa, 1988).

The Project HOUSE was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Academic Medical Center of Lisbon, of the Lisbon North Hospital Center, EPE. The participants received informed consent and were invited to answer the questionnaires online, voluntarily, anonymously and confidentially.

Further details on the HOUSE-Colégio F3, ULisbon study's data collection procedures may be found in the final report (HOUSE-Colégio F3, ULisbon, 2022).

2.1 | Participants

1143 university students participated in this study, 67.5% ($N=771$) female, aged between 17 and 65 years, with an average age of 19.61 years ($SD=3.96$). The sample included first-year students from 17 Faculties and Institutes of the University of Lisbon. All participants had taken compulsory education, and the questions were answered from an autobiographical perspective, analysing the pre-university school ecosystem retrospectively. We chose to use the autobiographical method, as this allows us to obtain personal information experienced in the past by the participants (i.e., personal experiences and historical narratives of the lives of individuals and the society in which each person is inserted). These memories are essential for the construction of individual identity and for a better understanding of the events that happened (Bauer, 2015; Hung & Bryant, 2016; Nóvoa, 1988). Of the young people surveyed, 88.9% ($N=1016$) were attending higher education for the first time.

2.2 | Measures and variables

Considering the objectives of the present study, data were collected through a set of self-report questions regarding the following variables (Table 1).

2.3 | Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 25 for IOS. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample. The Chi-Square test was used for independent variables to analyse the relationship between communication with parents, the incentive for school-family communication and the barriers to the school-family relationship. Independent sample *t*-tests were used to analyse the relationship between communication with parents and incentive for school-family communication with the variables of family support, parental monitoring, relationship with family, teachers and colleagues/peers and with the school-family communication and relationship.

A linear regression model (adjusted for age and gender) was carried out to analyse the predictive value of the variables with statistical significance in the previous analysis in the explanation of school-family communication and relationship. A significance level of $p < .05$ was determined.

3 | RESULTS

The characterization of the participants is shown in Table 2, as well as the analysis of their differences regarding communication with their parents (i.e., difficult/easy). Significant differences were found between the communication with parents and almost all the variables related to the school and family environment, except for two barriers to the school-family relationship (i.e., lack of initiative from teachers and lack of parent attendance at school meetings).

Young people with easier communication with their parents reported a greater incentive for communication between school and family and better school-family communication and relationship. These students also considered having greater family support and relationship, a greater perception of parental monitoring, and a better relationship with teachers and colleagues/peers. On the other hand, those who reported greater difficulty

TABLE 1 Measures and variables under study.

Variables	Measure
Gender	0–Female; 1–Male
Communication with parents	0–Difficult; 1–Easy
Incentive for school–family communication	0–No; 1–Yes
Lack of parental initiative as a barrier to the school–family relationship	0–No; 1–Yes
Lack of initiative from teachers as a barrier to the school–family relationship	0–No; 1–Yes
Lack of parent attendance at school meetings as a barrier to the school–family relationship	0–No; 1–Yes
Family support	Scale with 4 items, on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'I very strongly disagree' and 7 being 'I very strongly agree'. Higher values reveal greater family support. $\alpha = .95$
Parental monitoring	Scale with 5 items that assesses the parents' knowledge regarding their children's daily lives, on a 4-point Likert scale (1 know a lot and 4 don't know anything). Higher values reveal a greater perception of parental accompaniment and monitoring. $\alpha = .83$
Relationship with the family	Scale adapted from Cantril (1965), consisting of 11 steps, where the lowest step (0) corresponds to the worst quality of the family relationship and the highest step (10) to the best quality of the family relationship
Relationship with teachers	Scale adapted from Cantril (1965), consisting of 11 steps, where the lowest step (0) corresponds to the worst quality of the relationship with teachers and the highest step (10) to the best quality of the relationship with teachers
Relationship with colleagues/peers	Scale adapted from Cantril (1965), consisting of 11 steps, where the lowest step (0) corresponds to the worst quality of the relationship with colleagues and the highest step (10) to the best quality of the relationship with colleagues
School–family communication and relationship	Scale with four items, on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'Did not exist' and 5 being 'Good'. Higher values reveal a better perception of communication and relationship between school and family throughout the academic/school path. $\alpha = .85$

communicating with parents identified the lack of parental initiative as the main barrier to the school–family relationship.

Table 3 presents the bivariate analysis of the differences regarding the incentive for school–family communication. Statistically significant differences were found between most of the variables under study, except for the barriers to school–family relationships.

The incentive for school–family communication was statistically and significantly related to easy communication with parents, better family support and relationship and greater parental monitoring. Additionally, the incentive for school–family communication was associated with better relationships with teachers and colleagues/peers and better school–family communication and relationships.

The linear regression model shown in Table 4 intends to analyse the predictive value of variables related to school (i.e., relationship with teachers and peers) and family (i.e., family support/relationship and parental monitoring) in explaining school–family communication and relationship. The model, which was adjusted for age and gender and included as predictive variables those found to be significant in the bivariate analysis (Table 3), proved

TABLE 2 Population characteristics and bivariate analysis for the variable 'communication with parents' (Chi-square test and Student *t*-test).

	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> or % (n)			<i>p</i>
	Total	Difficult 40.4% (n = 431)	Easy 59.6% (n = 636)	
Incentive for school–family communication ^b				≤.001
No	40.6 (305)	51.2 (155)	32.0 (136)	
Yes	59.4 (447)	48.8 (148)	68.0 (289)	
Lack of parental initiative as a barrier to the school–family relationship ^b				≤.01
No	80.9 (599)	76.4 (240)	84.7 (343)	
Yes	19.1 (141)	23.6 (74)	15.3 (62)	
Lack of initiative from teachers as a barrier to the school–family relationship ^b				≤.057
No	52.7 (390)	57.0 (179)	49.9 (202)	
Yes	47.3 (350)	43.0 (135)	50.1 (203)	
Lack of parent attendance at school meetings as a barrier to the school–family ^b				≤.679
No	78.9 (584)	79.3 (249)	78.0 (316)	
Yes	21.1 (156)	20.7 (65)	22.0 (89)	
Family support ^a	21.91 ± 6.47	17.79 ± 6.75	24.90 ± 4.20	≤.001
Parental monitoring ^a	17.42 ± 2.54	16.55 ± 2.47	18.17 ± 2.01	≤.001
Relationship with the family ^a	8.15 ± 1.88	7.13 ± 1.99	8.90 ± 1.30	≤.001
Relationship with teachers ^a	6.58 ± 1.89	6.28 ± 1.89	6.80 ± 1.82	≤.001
Relationship with colleagues/peers ^a	7.30 ± 1.88	6.85 ± 2.02	7.64 ± 1.66	≤.001
School–family communication and relationship ^a	17.56 ± 3.00	16.89 ± 3.41	18.10 ± 2.44	≤.001

Note: Bold represents adjusted residuals >1.96.

Abbreviations: *M*, Mean; *SD*, standard deviation.

^aIndependent Sample *t*-test.

^bChi-square.

to be adequate and significant $F(10.473) = 110.30$; $p \leq .001$, and explains 22.3% of the variance of school–family communication and relationship.

According to the model, the school–family communication and relationship is better explained and has a positive relationship with the incentives for school–family communication, parental monitoring (better relationship and parental monitoring leads to better school–family communication and relationship) and relationship with colleagues/peers. Therefore, better school–family communication and relationship are associated with greater parental monitoring, a greater incentive for school–family communication and a better relationship with colleagues/peers.

4 | DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to analyse factors that may influence communication between the school and the family and the barriers that may hinder this communication. Young people's communication with their parents

TABLE 3 Bivariate analysis for the variable 'incentive to school–family communication'

	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> or % (n)		<i>p</i>
	No 40.6% (n = 305)	Yes 59.4% (n = 447)	
Communication with parents ^b			≤.001
Difficult	53.3 (155)	33.9 (148)	
Easy	46.7 (136)	66.1 (289)*	
Lack of parental initiative as a barrier to the school–family relationship ^b			≤.804
No	80.2 (195)	81.1 (219)	
Yes	19.8 (48)	18.9 (51)	
Lack of initiative from teachers as a barrier to the school–family relationship ^b			≤.061
No	46.9 (114)	55.2 (149)	
Yes	53.1 (129)	44.8 (121)	
Lack of parent attendance at school meetings as a barrier to the school–family ^b			≤.115
No	82.3 (200)	76.7 (207)	
Yes	17.7 (43)	23.3 (63)	
Family support ^a	19.60 ± 7.20	23.38 ± 5.63	≤.001
Parental monitoring ^a	16.75 ± 2.70	17.90 ± 2.21	≤.001
Relationship with the family ^a	7.60 ± 2.14	8.50 ± 1.59	≤.001
Relationship with teachers ^a	6.22 ± 1.89	6.76 ± 1.93	≤.001
Relationship with colleagues/peers ^a	6.82 ± 2.12	7.54 ± 1.80	≤.001
School–family communication and relationship ^a	16.19 ± 3.41	18.63 ± 2.19	≤.001

Note: The results were adjusted to age and gender.

*Adjusted residuals > 1.96.

Abbreviations: *M*, Mean; *SD*, standard deviation.

^aIndependent Sample *t*-test.

^bChi-square.

and the existing incentives for school–family communication and relationship were analysed. It was intended to explore the factors that encourage communication between the school and the family, the existing barriers, communication with parents, family support, parental monitoring and the relationship with teachers and colleagues, with an impact on communication and relationship between the school and family.

The results show that young people who have easier communication with their parents are the ones who report better family relationships, greater family support and a greater perception of parental monitoring. These results align with the literature, showing that better communication between parents and children is associated with more positive and healthy family relationships (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009). Young people who communicate more efficiently with their parents also report that school–family communication is encouraged, school–family communication and relationships are improved, and relationships with teachers and classmates are improved. There is evidence that parental involvement in the educational process and family cohesion are essential aspects of young people's well-being, performance and academic engagement (Castro et al., 2015; Davidson & Cardemil, 2009; Jaynes, 2015, 2017; Stubbs & Maynard, 2017), which is consistent with the results obtained in this study.

Conversely, young people who report greater difficulty in communicating with their parents identify the parents' lack of initiative as the main barrier to the school–family relationship. Similarly, a study by Xia et al. (2016)

TABLE 4 Linear regression of school–family communication and relationship on school and family context variables.

	Non-standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t
	B	Standard error	β	
Communication with parents	-0.16	0.31	-0.03	-0.51
Incentive to school–family communication	1.72	0.27	0.28***	6.46
Lack of parental initiative as a barrier to the school–family relationship	-0.19	0.34	-0.02	-0.57
Family support	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.74
Parental monitoring	0.14	0.06	0.11*	2.19
Relationship with the family	0.14	0.11	0.08	1.28
Relationship with teachers	-0.01	0.08	-0.01	-0.02
Relationship with colleagues/peers	0.29	0.08	0.18***	3.62

Note: The results were adjusted for age and gender. The variables were entered using the 'enter' mode.

* $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .001$.

demonstrated a reciprocal influence between family environment and school engagement in that more positive family relationships promote greater school engagement and vice versa.

The young people who report the existence of more incentive for school–family communication during their schooling are those who also report better family relationships (i.e., better communication with their parents, more support and better family relationships, as well as more parental monitoring), better school relationships (i.e., better relationships with teachers and peers) and better school–family communication. These results align with the literature showing that the school–family relationship plays a crucial role in students' social development and learning (Chen, 2019; Daniel, 2015; Sağkal, 2019; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Moreover, our findings also suggest that the interactions between the family and school context play a prominent role in the results obtained by the students at all levels of their development (school, personal and social) (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017).

A study by Saltmarsh and McPherson (2019) found that parents with the best experiences in school engagement also point to clear communication policies contributing to their satisfaction with the school. There is evidence that parental communication and presence in all areas of young people's lives provide healthier family relationships and higher academic performance (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009; Guedes et al., 2022; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Stubbs & Maynard, 2017).

The involvement of families in school encompasses, for example, the development of activities (playful and non-playful) with all the educational agents. Evidence shows that greater involvement of the entire school and family community provides better academic results and greater satisfaction with school (Chen, 2019; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Sağkal, 2019; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2019).

The present work has some limitations that should be considered: (1) It relies on self-reported data regarding the students' memories of the previous school year (thus, some bias may occur); (2) It followed a cross-sectional design, not allowing to make inferences of causality; (3) The female gender is over-represented in the sample, which may bring some bias; (4) It was carried out during the pandemic of COVID-19; (5) Participants were students from the public school system of a specific University. Therefore, there must be caution in the generalization of the results to all Portuguese students (e.g., students from the private school system or students who dropped out of school were not included). Despite these limitations, this work has several strengths: (1) It is a large-scale

study; (2) it followed a rigorous methodology to collect data on students from all the Faculties/Institutes of the University of Lisbon; (3) it furthers the knowledge about this topic in a specific population (i.e., first-year university students), thus allowing a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

It is necessary to raise families' and schools' awareness of the importance of family involvement in school, not only regarding young people's achievement and academic learning but also in establishing and developing positive relationships and other socioemotional skills. Therefore, it is important to develop and implement intervention programs in school and family contexts, which promote students' and their educational agents' personal and socioemotional skills, individually and in groups. These interventions may impact the functioning, communication and school-family relationship and motivate the relationship between these two contexts.

It is also necessary to develop and implement school policies that promote transparency in communication and relationships with parents, focusing on creating more effective communication channels that encourage greater involvement of parents at school. In the following studies, it will be necessary to deepen the knowledge of barriers to the school-family relationship in addition to those already mentioned (i.e., lack of initiative from parents or teachers and lack of parental attendance at meetings) and to find strategies and suggestions to optimize this relationship. Existing barriers and incentives for school-family communication must be deepened considering the perspective of educational agents (i.e., teachers and parents). The relevance of medium and long-term impact assessment studies is highlighted, as the literature highlights the relevance of continuing measures promoting a change in the culture of the school institution in order to make it more accessible to families. These measures should not be read as a call for over-protection and non-autonomy but rather as a call for monitoring and supporting family presence that promotes that autonomy.

By developing these suggestions and delving into the needs of the target population, we will be able to contribute in a more solid and action-oriented way, providing insights and practical guidelines for better communication between school and family, which will have a direct impact on the well-being of students and the entire school community. These measures are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic period we are facing, in which an exercise of sharing ideas-solutions among the various school ecosystems can be developed. Therefore, we suggest creating a school-family proximity model that may support a broad debate on how to promote young people's well-being and learning development. This message is vital for health and education professionals and public policymakers so that they consider this transitional age to continue the support provided in the educational pathway preceding higher education.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship and/or publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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