

Letting go: Tips for parents of new college students

The emotional roller coaster

Recognize this is a time of ambivalence for all parents.

The excitement and joy about opportunities awaiting your child are mixed with the waves of nostalgia and a sense of loss. Talk with other parents who are going through the same thing.

Recognize your child's conflicting emotions.

Your child, like you, is being pulled between past, present and future ... one day exclaiming "leave me alone; I'm 18 years old. I'm independent" and the next complaining "you're never around when I need you." Your child's ups and downs are a sign of the ambivalence of this transitional time.

Take comfort in the knowledge that part of you is going with your child.

The foundation you have provided over the past 18 years will accompany your child across the miles and throughout the years.

Don't tell your child "These are the best years of your life."

No one is happy all the time between the ages of 18 and 22, and when a student is homesick or overtired from studying all night, it's not reassuring to have parents imply that this is as good as it gets!

Enjoy this time of celebration.

Try not to focus so much on the upcoming departure that you might miss the full impact of the senior year festivities and the joy of summer days ahead.

The summer before

Be prepared to see less of your child this summer.

The closer it gets to departure time, the less you can expect to see of your child. He will likely be spending every waking hour with friends. Allow them this special time together.

Make a financial plan and discuss expectations with your child.

Develop a tentative budget and be clear about who will pay for what. For example, some parents pay for books and supplies, while their child is responsible for incidental expenses such as snacks, movies, and CDs. Other students are responsible for earning a percentage of their tuition. Teach your child about responsible use of credit and debit cards.

Discuss academic goals and expectation ahead of time.

Remember, many freshmen do not do as well academically first semester as they did in high school, and many change their minds about their proposed course of study. Ask them what they hope to accomplish academically during their first year. It is important for them to take ownership of their education. Grades are not the only indication of learning.

Communication: Keeping in touch

Talk to your child about how you'll keep in touch.

Do you want a planned time to talk or do you want to be more spontaneous? A cell phone can be a wonderful way to keep in touch, or it can be, as one student described, an "electronic leash." Encourage your child to use it with discretion and not just to fill in the spaces. E-mail and instant messaging are also wonderful ways to keep in touch. Just don't count on a reply to every message.

Be a coach rather than trying to solve your child's problems yourself.

You're likely to hear more than your share of problems. College students usually call their parents for reassurance when things aren't going well, and call their friends with the latest exciting news. When you get those late night phone calls, and you will, you can encourage your child to use the appropriate campus resources — to go to the health service or career center, to talk to an advisor, dean, a counselor or tutor. Read resource information sent to you by the college so you can be an informed coach for your child.

Be an anchor.

Keep your child informed about changes at home. College students want their parents to accept all the changes they are making but want everything at home to stay the same. So it's important to keep them informed about changes at home, whether it's moving a younger sibling into their room, or, on a more serious note, about illness in the family or the death of a pet. They need this from you in order to feel secure and maintain a sense of trust.

Parent's Guide to Letting Go

Getting a college education means acquiring knowledge and gaining additional skills.

However, it's also about exploring new ideas and opportunities in life. That additional freedom also means increased responsibility for the student. It can take a lot of self-discipline to go to class every day when so many other opportunities abound.

Coping with these new ideas and opportunities is not always easy. For most students, college is neither harder nor easier than high school. It's just different. The same is true for parents.

The hardest part is often "letting go". College is part of a student's search for maturity and self-identity. Parents or guardians need to change their style of parenting with their college-age students. Although students still need love and support, the parental figures in their lives need to become less involved.

Getting to College

It's almost time, but are you ready?

If you aren't sure what your child should pack for college, here are some quick tips:

- **Check with the college for a list of what's provided** by the school and what the school expects the student to provide. Most schools have such a list. It's also useful if your child is considering off-campus housing. Compare the list to the amenities offered by alternative housing options.
- **Pack clothing that's appropriate to the season** and the geographical location of the school. Don't try to pack clothes for the entire year. Use school breaks to exchange seasonal clothing. Or pack and send them through the mail.
- **Pack a laundry bag or basket, detergent and change** (usually quarters) for laundry. Have enough money to wash a load or two in case your child forgets to get change in the first-week rush.
- **Bring extension cords, power strips and three-prong adapters.** Dorm rooms seldom have enough power outlets and often have older-style wall sockets.
- **Stay cool by bringing along a fan or two for those schools in warmer climates.** Many dorms aren't air-conditioned. Don't bring an air conditioner unless you're sure the school allows it.
- **Consider some type of renters' insurance** if electronics and computer equipment will be kept in the dorm room to cover damages in case of fire or theft.
- **Make sure that the dorm room has at least one smoke alarm.** A fire can happen anywhere, and an alarm is inexpensive protection.

If you're driving to school, here are some quick tips:

- If you plan to rent a van or a small truck, reserve it at least a month in advance of the move. When other family members are helping, consider a one-way truck rental and have a family member drive a car so you have it for the trip home.
- If you need to stay overnight before moving in, make hotel or motel reservations well in advance. Make sure to have secure overnight parking place at or near the school for your van or small truck.

If you're flying to school, here are some quick tips:

- Make airline reservations early. If possible, have a Saturday night stay over to get the best rates.
- Consider reserving a car at the airport so that you have transportation to and from the school.
- If you need to stay overnight before moving in, make hotel or motel reservations well in advance.

Be Prepared for Changes

College is a time of transition. There is no way to move through such a transition without feeling some sense of excitement and loss. The excitement is easy to handle. The sense of loss or dislocation is less so...especially for parents.

Students often seem different after they've been in college for awhile. There may be changes in eating and sleeping habits, hair styles, how they see themselves, and how they interact with the rest of the family.

The key is to be prepared for these changes. Don't make snap judgments on the quality or character of the differences. They may change again in the next month. Try to appreciate that your child's view of the world is expanding.

The following can help you successfully "let go" as your child goes to college:

- **Build an adult relationship** with your child with phone calls, e-mails, letters and "care" packages. Let the student control the timing of these interactions to help maintain that sense of freedom.
- **Focus on the things you enjoyed doing** before your child began college. Don't try and fill your life with new commitments to fill the void left by your child's absence. Focus on yourself for a while or other members of your family.
- **Don't feel guilty** if you adjust to your child being in college before other parents do. Everyone is different. Each parent makes the adjustment in his or her own time.

- **Work to keep your emotions under wraps.** If you burst into tears every time you speak to your child, he or she may feel bad about being in school and may avoid talking with you.
- **Try not to focus conversations on problems** or uncertainties you're facing in your life. Help your child focus on his or her new goals or activities.
- **Limit any other major changes** in your life for a while. Sending your child to college is enough of a shock. Changing jobs or moving to a new house could send everyone over the edge!

If you have other children at home, here are some other points to keep in mind:

- **Keep your sense of loss or grief under wraps.** If your other children see that you're very upset, they may get the feeling that you value the college student more than you do them.
- **Don't try to turn one of the remaining siblings into a mirror image** of the one who's gone to college. Both children will resent it.

Stay Connected

How can you "let go" of your child without cutting off your love and support? It's not as hard as you might think. In general, students simply like to communicate with their loved ones on their own terms, in their own time.

Here are some ways that you can stay connected without infringing on your child's new-found freedom:

- **Provide your child with a pre-paid phone card** that he or she can use at any time. It's a gentle way of reminding your child to stay in touch. Consider giving your child a cell phone if he or she doesn't have one.
- **Communicate via e-mail.** It's inexpensive and allows the student to communicate with you as his or her schedule allows.
- **Write letters.** Many students look forward to the mail delivery every day, even though they don't always have the time to write or call in response. Don't take it personally.
- **Check the college's web site.** Many have a "Parent's Corner" that contains important information about what's happening at the school.
- **Send small care packages** with items such as treats, quarters for doing laundry, flowers and local news clippings.
- **Visit your child during Parent's Weekend.** Don't plan to spend every minute of both days with your student. Let your student set the tone for how the weekend is spent.
- **Allow yourself to be a "shoulder to cry on".** College is stressful and frustrating for many students. When your child calls or writes, listen and don't be judgmental. Students usually aren't asking for a solution to the problem. They simply want to vent to someone.

If your main form of communication is the telephone, here are some ideas for getting the most out of your conversations:

- **Make a list of items you want to discuss.** Keep it near the phone so that when your child calls, you can cover any important topics.
- **Begin your calls with positive news.** Don't put a damper on the conversation by immediately bringing up bad news.
- **Share news about yourself and life at home**, but don't go on and on about people your child doesn't know or like.
- **Let your child determine the length of your talk.** He or she may need to study or go to class. Controlling the amount of conversation is also another way your child can exercise his or her freedom. If you need more time, ask to schedule some uninterrupted time to talk.
- **Don't ask a question if you don't want to hear the answer.** If you respond in a judgmental fashion to something your child tells you, it will limit how much he or she shares with you in the future.

Student Finances

Once you and your child have developed a plan to pay for college, it's a good idea to discuss how he or she will pay for everyday expenses.

In general, your child should plan on between \$200 and \$400 a month in spending money for living expenses and school supplies. If your child lives off campus, his or her expenses may be higher.

Stress the importance of maintaining a budget. Help your child create a plan to handle everyday expenses:

- Develop a budget prior to the beginning of school.
- Determine who will supply the spending money and how frequently it will be sent. Discuss what will happen if your child runs short of money.
- Establish a bank account in the town where your child will be studying. Find one that has a good relationship with the school and with students. If your student has a checking account for the first time, teach him or her how to set up and maintain a checkbook.
- Remind your child to keep the checkbook and the ATM card in a safe place.
- Record the bank's ABA routing code and the student's account number in case you need to wire money.

Credit cards are now a fact of life for most adults. The same is true for college students who often receive a credit card regardless of their credit history (or lack of one). Some colleges have credit counselors to help those students who have fallen deeply into debt.

If you allow your student to have and use a credit card, keep these thoughts in mind:

- Make sure your child understands how to use the credit card in relation to his or her budget.
- Emphasize that proper use of a credit card can help your child establish a good credit history.
- Remind your child that over-charges and late or missed payments can cause severe damage to your child's credit rating.

Student Health

Freedom to explore the possibilities of life is a big part of what college is all about.

But college also can be physically and mentally demanding. Students may exercise their new-found freedom by:

- Studying too hard
- Working too hard
- Getting insufficient sleep
- Eating an unbalanced diet
- Playing too hard
- Ignoring a potentially serious illness

Issues about sex, sexuality, alcohol and drugs also confront today's college students. Is your child ready to handle these facts of life? Are you ready to have your student deal with these issues? Take time to discuss what to do in case of illness and the issues concerning alcohol and drug abuse.

Student Safety

Crime is a fact of life at colleges and universities around the United States. That should come as no surprise considering that 18 to 25 year-olds commit more crimes in our country than any other age group.

Parents and students shouldn't hesitate to question the school's crime statistics. This information as well as the following tips can help keep your child from becoming a victim:

- Your child should always travel in groups or use a campus escort service after dark or early in the morning. He or she should never take short-cuts, jog or walk alone at night.
- Encourage your child to share his or her class schedule and phone list with you and other friends.
- Help your child study the area around the campus and the college neighborhood. Identify potentially dangerous areas and where the campus emergency phones are located.

- First-year students should decline having any photos or personal information published for distribution around the campus. This type of publication has been used to target freshmen.
- Check out the social scene by driving through the "fraternity row" on a Friday or Saturday night. Stroll through other places where students gather. How are the students behaving? Are they abusing alcohol or drugs? The less contact your student has with alcohol and drugs and the people who abuse them, the safer he or she will be.

Tips for Students Living in Residence Halls:

- Remind your student not to leave valuables such as wallets, laptops or ATM cards in plain sight.
- Help your student to program his or her telephone with emergency phone numbers including police, fire, family and friends.
- Encourage your student to get to know his or her neighbors, and not to be shy about reporting strangers who are loitering and/or engaged in illegal activities.