

Letting go: Tips for parents of new college students

After 18 years of parenting, it can be hard to let go. Here is a sneak peek at the challenges of the transition ahead and advice to prepare right now.

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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.

Acknowledge that college today is different. Although century-old buildings look untouched by time, college life today is very different from the campus scene 25 or 30 years ago. For those of you who went to college, think twice before beginning a sentence with "When I was in college..."

Ask about courses rather than focusing on grades. Invite your child to share with you the discovery of new ideas, academic interests and intellectual passions.

Send care packages. Early in the year, sharing popcorn or chocolate chip cookies is a wonderful way for a student to meet floor mates. Photographs are personal reminders of home. Holiday decorations, baskets of treats at exam time, and even everyday necessities like shampoo and quarters for the washing machine are reminders that say, "I'm thinking of you."

When students come back home

Renegotiate expectations. Your child has been making decisions on how she will spend her time for many months. You, however, may have strong feelings of your own when she comes in late at night, sleeps late in the morning or arrives late for dinner. Most students respond well if parents treat them with respect. For example, a parent might say, "I know you're used to being out until all hours of the night at school, but I can't sleep when I wake up at 2 in the morning and you're not here. Let's talk about how we're going to handle this so that we'll both feel good about it." It takes flexibility and communication to find a common ground.

Understand that the college years are a time for exploration. Your son or daughter may come home with a new look; someone else's clothes; or new politics, philosophies, or eating habits. Most of these changes are not permanent. Take a step back, have a sense of humor, and pick your battles.

Don't overschedule. Tell your child ahead of time about family plans, especially over the holidays, so that he or she can make plans accordingly.

Throughout the college years

Expect change. Students will change the way they think and way they look. Many will change their majors and career goals. They need you to stick with them, have patience when they are uncertain and support them as they chart the course of their own lives.

College students care more about what you think than they are likely to let you know. They quote you, talk about you and look to you for encouragement. As they journey toward adulthood and independence, sometimes they want your advice and sometimes they just want you to listen. And as one of them put it, "We just won't tell you which time is which."

Welcome to the delights and dilemmas of being a parent of a college student.