

Helping Your Child Make A Successful Transition From High School To College

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The college paperwork monster of admissions forms, essays, and financial aid pleas that threatened the past few months to swallow your household has been tamed.

Just weeks ago, as “Pomp and Circumstance” blared through tinny speakers, thousands of teenagers padded across a stage, collected their diplomas, moved their tassels across their mortarboards, and bid adieu to high school.

Maybe that means that come this fall, your child is off to college. If so, that means changes for your teenager far beyond trading pimple cream for shaving cream.

Moving from old friends to unfamiliar faces, a familiar bedroom to a strange residence hall, meals around the family table to chow in the college cafeteria, and classes in cozy high school classrooms to cavernous lecture halls can prove disconcerting to the most mature incoming freshman.

Transition from high school to college often produces, in these young adults, anxiety and ripping uncertainty. Not only must these newly minted college whiz kids adjust to new accommodations, new friends, and newfound freedom, they often wrestle with homesickness and trying to fit into an environment that often proves more diverse than the communities from whence they came.

Not that these incoming freshmen are the only ones facing challenges. Separation anxiety for parents can be difficult--coming to terms with the departure of the children you have nurtured to young adulthood.

But, in the weeks leading up to that fateful drive to your child’s chosen college campus, parents can help ease the transition to college for their teenagers--and themselves--through open discussion with their children about common concerns, involvement in orientation activities, and exercising parental restraint.

Here is a guide to do just that:

RAP SESSIONS

Last-minute lectures by pontificating parents over things such as money, grades, sexual relations, or a dearth of phone calls home only cultivate unnecessary friction, says Karen Levin Coburn, Associate Dean of Students at Washington University in St. Louis. She is also the co-author of *Letting Go: A Parents’ Guide to Understanding the College Years* (HarperPerennial). Instead, Coburn suggests a healthy dialogue on four essential areas of concern:

Finances: “For many students, the struggles for separation and independence are complicated by their prolonged years of financial dependence,” Coburn says. “Parents can help loosen the financial cord by encouraging their children to assume responsibility for the management of their own financial affairs. Parents should be honest with them about family finances and clear right from the beginning about how much money the student will need to earn and how much the parents will be able to contribute.”

Academics: College freshmen are just beginning to explore their own interests and capabilities, Coburn says. “Parental expectations and assumptions about what they should study can act as barriers to a student’s development. Eventually, if students are to separate and become independent, they must take responsibility for their own academic goals and performance. The challenge to parents will be to remain supportive and open to change.”

Social life: Drugs, sex, and alcohol--often so readily available in the college scene--can prove as alluring as a private pool on a sultry summer day. Freshmen arrive on the scene brimming with the values inculcated in them by their parents. These values slam into the new choices and freedoms they find in the unfettered world of college life. Maybe, when the time comes, the teenager will hear the admonitions of his parents whisper in his ear like a trusted friend. Or not. “With that in mind,” Coburn says, “it’s a good time to relay again your beliefs and worries--and to acknowledge that it will be a challenge. Kids may roll their eyes, but it gives them something to hold on to.”

Communication: With miles often separating college students from their families, Mom and Dad often worry how to keep in touch with their children on a basis more regular than the coming of Haley’s comet. Families should devise a tentative answer to this question before the child shoves off for college. “Students may not actually admit--or even realize--how important it is for them to hear from the family,” Coburn says. “But, students do count on their parents to keep them informed about what is happening at home, in the family, in the neighborhood.” The telephone, of course, is the old standby. Parents should consider buying a “call-home card”--a credit card good only for calls to the parent’s home number--as a post-graduation gift. Phone cards are less expensive than collect calls. The cards also put the student in charge. “For some students, regular phone calls from home seem intrusive and controlling. They would prefer to choose the time, as well as the topic of their conversations.” Technology also helps. Faxes, e-mail, cell phones and pagers help keep families in touch.

GETTING ORIENTED

Though your child is trooping off to a new experience requiring a higher level of maturity, most colleges do not just throw students to the academic lions, says Gue P. Hudson, dean of students at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, Ga.

“There are many resources within the college community available specifically to support both students and their families as they adjust to college and life away from home for the first time,” says Hudson, also the vice president for student life and community relations for the independent liberal arts college for women. Hudson offers parents and college freshmen this orienteering strategy:

Learn about the college and its traditions and how students can grow to connect to the values alive in the campus community. Each institution has its own, unique character and those special qualities are ones that help make the college experience so meaningful.

Attend all orientation activities. There parents and students will gain valuable insight into the support resources and campus organizations available to students, as well as meet staff, faculty, and student leaders who are the student’s new community.

Establish regular communications patterns. Whether that be weekly e-mails on Wednesdays, half-hour phone calls on Sundays, weekly letters, monthly visits, regular and reliable communications will be the

constant reminder to daughters and sons that no matter the distance between them, their parents, sisters, and brothers are never really that far away.

Use the resources the institution offers. Acquaint yourself with the many resources that exist to support the needs of a child in a new environment (counseling, support on such topics as roommates, homesickness, career planning, etc.)

Call for backup if all else fails. If parents have concerns about their children at college, if problems or negative issues persist, do not hesitate to call the Dean of Students. The Dean and her staff can help only if they know about and understand the problem.”

RESTRAIN YOUR PARENTAL URGES

Of all the trials of parenting, letting go is often the hardest.

Even as you drop off your teenage freshman at his or her dormitory, Mom and Dad still see their little baby and loping off the umbilical cord seems an impossible task. Here are some tips parents and students should follow that might make the experience of letting go somewhat easier:

Try not to linger: Parents should help their child settle in and leave. Do not return until parents' weekend (usually mid-autumn)--unless the child requests your presence.

Be a listening ear for your student: Sometimes, says Debbie Heida, Vice President of Student Development at Wittenberg University, a small, liberal arts university located in Springfield, Ohio, "all they want is someone to listen and sympathize."

Give situations 24 hours before reacting: Unless the circumstances are incredibly serious, allow some time for the matter to resolve itself. "Often times if a student just wanted someone to listen, it's already resolved in their mind and the parent is still worrying about it."

Be strong: You should brace for some teary telephone calls. Do not resort to cavalry mode automatically. Only if after several months -- if these calls persist -- should you consider stepping in.

The first year of college can be an emotional rollercoaster for children and parents, a puzzle that takes time to fit the pieces into place. By following these strategies and holding realistic expectations, you can both make the transition successfully and look forward to another trip across the stage accompanied by the tinny strains of "Pomp and Circumstance."