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Tips for Parents of College Students

Rule #1: Avoid Asking Them If They're Homesick

The power of association can be a dangerous thing. A friend once told me, "The idea of being homesick didn't even occur to me, what with all the new things that were going on, until my mom called on one of the first weekends and asked, 'Are you homesick?' Then it hit me." The first few days and weeks of school are packed with activities and meeting new friends. The challenge of meeting new people and adjusting to new situations takes a majority of a new student's time and concentration. So, unless they are reminded of it (by a well-meaning parent), students will probably be able to escape severe bouts of homesickness. And, they may not tell you this-but they really do miss you.

Rule #2: Write (Even If They Don't Write Back)

Although first-year students are typically eager to experience all the away-from-home independence they can in those first weeks, most are still anxious for family ties and the security those ties bring. This surge of independence may be misinterpreted by sensitive parents as rejection, but I'd bet most first-year students (although 99 percent won't ever admit it) would give anything for some news of home and family, however mundane it may seem to you. Email and Instant Messaging are great methods for keeping in touch with your student.

Rule #3: Ask Questions (But Not Too Many)

First-year college students are "cool" (or so they say). They have a tendency to resent interference from mom or dad about their collegiate lifestyle and independent status-but most still yearn for the security of knowing that their family members are interested in and care about them. Parental curiosity can be perceived as obnoxious and alienating or as helpful and supportive, depending on the approach and the attitudes of the people involved. Questions or statements that begin with, "I have a right to know" or "I'm paying the bills, so I expect you to tell me everything" should be avoided. However, honest inquiries that foster discussion and encourage independent decision-making are very helpful in developing a productive parent-student relationship.

Rule #4: Expect Change (But Not Too Much)

Expect your student to change. Change may occur drastically within the first few months of school, slowly over time, or somewhere in between. Change is natural and inevitable, and it can be inspiring and beautiful. Quite often, though, change can be very frustrating-both for you and for your student. College and the experiences associated with it can affect

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changes in social, vocational, and personal behavior and choices. Someone who has always prided herself on long hair may suddenly decide that she wants a very short haircut, the quiet and reserved over-achiever may choose to have an ear pierced or get a tattoo, or the student who has been following the family tradition of becoming a physician may decide to pursue philosophy instead.

You can't stop change-you may not even understand it-but it is within your power to try to accept it. Remember that your son or daughter, in essence, will be the same person you sent to college, aside from some changes. Don't expect too much, too soon. Maturation takes time and is not an instantaneous process. In fact, you might discover your student returning home with some of the habits and hang-ups, however unsophisticated, that you thought he or she had "grown out of." Although it isn't always easy, be patient.

Rule #5: Don't Worry (Too Much) About Depressive Phone Calls or Letters

Parenting can sometimes be a thankless job, especially during the college years. It often involves a great deal of giving and only a little receiving. Frequently, when problems become too much for a student to handle (a failed exam, ended relationship, and a shrunken t-shirt all in one day), the only (and best) place for the student to turn, dial, or write is home. Often, and unfortunately, this is the only time when that urge to communicate with mom or dad is felt so strongly, and you don't get to hear about that "A" paper, the new friend or the domestic triumph. During these "crisis" times, your student can unload trouble and tears and, after the catharsis, return to routine-relieved and lightened-while you inherit the burden of worry.

Of course, you should pay attention to the frequency of depressive messages or conversations. Changes in mood or behavior may be an early indication of emotional or psychological distress. If you are concerned that your student is troubled, speak to your son or daughter when you notice something unusual. Communicate directly in a caring manner describing the behaviors that are cause for concern, and use "I" language that focuses on what you notice or feel. Be willing to listen to what your son or daughter has to say, and avoid being critical or judgmental. Encourage responsibility by helping your son or daughter to define the problem and identify possible solutions. Remember that the College has lots of resources to help your student, including counseling.

Rule #6: Visit (But Not Too Often)

Visits by parents (especially when accompanied by shopping sprees and/or dinners out) are another part of the first-year events that new students are reluctant to admit liking, but would appreciate greatly. Remember, pretended disdain of those visits is just another part of the first-year syndrome.

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Visits give the student a chance to introduce some of the important people in both of his or her now-important worlds (home and school) to each other. Additionally, it's a way for parents to become familiar with (and, hopefully more understanding of) their student's new activities, commitments, and friends. If you're parenting a commuter student, take an active interest in his or her life as a student by visiting campus with your son or daughter one day, or have your student invite his or her friends to dinner in your home.

Spur-of-the-moment "surprises" are usually not appreciated. While you may be excited about surprising your student with a visit, your son or daughter may not be happy to see you when you arrive. Pre-emption of a planned evening of studying or a weekend filled with activities can have disastrous results. Always remember, call first.

Rule #7: Do Not Tell Your Students That "These Are the Best Years of Their Lives"

The first year of college (and the other three as well) may be laden with indecision, insecurity, disappointments and mistakes. On the other hand, they're also full of discovery, inspiration, good times and new people. However, except in retrospect, it's not the good that stands out. "It took a while (and with the help of some good friends) for me to realize that I was normal and that my afternoon movie/paperback novel perceptions of what college was all about were inaccurate. It took awhile for me to accept that being unhappy, afraid, confused, disliking people, and making mistakes (in other words, accepting myself) were all part of the show, all part of this new reality, all part of growing up. It took a while longer for my parents to accept it."

Any parent who believes that all college students get good grades, know what they want to major in, always have activity-packed weekends, thousands of close friends, and lead carefree, worry-free lives is wrong. So are the parents that think that college-educated means mistake-proof. Parents that perpetuate and insist upon the "best years" stereotype can create counter-productive situations that work against their child's already difficult self-development. Those parents who accept and understand the highs and lows of their student's reality are providing the support and encouragement where it's needed most.

Rule #8: Trust Them

Finding oneself is a difficult process without feeling that the people whose opinions you respect most are second-guessing your own second-guessing. One of the most important things my mom ever wrote me in my four years at college was this: "I love you and want for you all the things that make you the happiest; and I guess you, not I, are the one who knows best what those things are." She wrote that during my senior year. Believe in your son or daughter, have faith, and communicate your trust.

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Note: The list above is adapted from Michelsen, J. (1976), "Parenting a College Freshmen," Peoria, IL: Bradley University. The suggestions are purposely subjective and were written by a student not long after graduation. They are based on careful observations of mistakes and/or breakthroughs made by her parents and the families of her friends. The original material has been adapted to reflect changes over the past 30 years since the piece was written.