

Staying Connected to Your College-bound Teen

By Susan Orenstein, Ph.D.

One of the top reasons students drop out of college is lack of parental support. You may be focused on what your son or daughter needs to take to college, but how much time have you spent considering what you should bring to your new relationship? Sending your teen son or daughter to college is a key milestone for you and your family. As you prepare for your child to leave home, you might experience a roller coaster of emotions, including excitement, pride and joy, as well as stress and sheer terror. As your almost grown child develops a stronger sense of identity and independence over the next four years, your parenting role will change, but it will remain very important. A strong parent-child relationship is essential to your son or daughter's confidence and college success. Here are some strategies to help you as a parent prepare for your new parenting role:

DON'T interrupt, give unsolicited advice or try to take control of your child's problems. **Instead**, listen. Everyone likes receiving another's undivided attention. Your children will appreciate a safe place to air their thoughts, feelings, dreams and concerns. Attentive listening is one of the best gifts a parent can give a child. Your children will feel empowered to solve their own problems once they are able to talk things through.

DON'T minimize your child's feelings through invalidating statements, such as, "College is supposed to be the best time of your life," or "I wasn't as fortunate as you when I was your age."

Instead, acknowledge her feelings. Young adults' feelings can be intense and may change rapidly, but they are still real.

DON'T share any lack of confidence you may have in your child or review his past failures.

Instead, focus on his strengths. Remind him of his positive qualities and coping skills during the hard times. Also, notice (aloud) when your child is working hard, handling a tough situation maturely or developing any other positive character traits. He will appreciate this acknowledgement.

DON'T hide your love and affection for your child.

Instead, give genuine compliments and expressions of support and concern. Find ways to show your affection in little ways. College students love receiving letters, e-mail and care packages.

DON'T let your child's suffering go unnoticed.

Instead, know when to step in. Express the concerns you have about her behavior, mood, relationships, and so forth, in non-judgmental terms. Listen to her responses and ask how you can be helpful. If you believe your child is at risk of being harmed or will hurt him or herself, contact the appropriate school resources, such as the resident counselor, campus police, university counseling center or the dean of student life.

DON'T hide family crises such as divorce or family illness from your child or spring bad news upon them when they return home on breaks.

Instead, give your child advance notice to prepare for a change in the family's lifestyle. Choose a time when he will be receptive to hearing difficult news (not the night before finals!) and share the information in a sensitive manner. Encourage your child to express thoughts and feelings about the news and acknowledge his right to those feelings.

DON'T pin all of your expectations and dreams on your child's achievements and happiness.

Instead, get a life! Enjoy your newfound freedom by nurturing yourself, exploring your interests and developing your own relationships.

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