

- **The Changing Role for Parents of College Students**

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If you're the parent (or soon-to-be parent) of a college-age student, you are all too aware of how your daughter or son has changed over the years. From that cute little baby way back when, to a young adult now, your child has gone through a lot changes over the years...and so have you. Along the way, you've loved, nurtured, directed, instructed, corrected, and coached your child. Your role as a parent has likely changed as your child has matured. And, hopefully, you are ready to take another step in how you parent as your son or daughter heads down the final stretch toward becoming an independent and functioning adult. For how you parent during this stage of life will go a long way to determining whether your child will enter their adult lives dragging their feet or sailing into it with the wind at their backs.

#### **Become an Advisor**

Simply said, the goal of parenting is to produce an independent and functioning adult. With this in mind, the role of a parent with a child in college should change to become advisory in capacity: to provide lots of support, encouragement, and when needed, accountability. During the stage of late adolescence, young adults want to begin to stretch their wings of independence. They want to call their own shots. This is the time for parents to learn the delicate art of diplomacy. Your young adult won't want your opinion about every aspect of their life. They won't want to text you every night before they go to bed (if they go to bed). They won't ask for permission on their upcoming weekend plans. While there will be appropriate times for weighing in on your son or daughter's life issues, the significant change in this life phase is that when they want your advice and counsel, they'll ask for it. Ask God to give you wisdom for knowing when to hold your tongue and when to speak up.

How this change to an advisory role works out in real life depends largely upon the groundwork you've laid up until now. Parents who have maintained a high degree of control over their teenager during the high school years will have a different experience than the parents who have slowly but steadily allowed their child to become more independent. The point for parents to focus on, regardless of previous parenting styles, is to help your son or daughter make a successful transition to the more independent lifestyle students experience on college campuses.

#### **A Word to Controlling Parents**

It's important to know that kids who have grown up in a strongly controlling environment often face a more difficult transition to college life – from performing simple life tasks like managing time to the more complex adult decisions like facing sexual and alcohol-related temptations. Some young adults who come from these environments find their arrival at college to be the first time they experience a large measure of independence and, at least for a time, react with a certain degree of "wildness," at least in part as a throwing off of the constraints that were placed upon them in childhood. As a parent, if you know that you have raised your child with a high degree of control, or find yourself concerned about your young adult's ability to manage his or her own life, the time to start addressing potential problems is *before* he or she heads off to college. Start by evaluating your parenting style. Trying to enforce a strong measure of ongoing control with your young adult at college is simply not the answer and will actually work against the process leading your child to becoming a responsible adult. Now is the time to begin the process of letting go in earnest.

#### **Yeah, But We're Paying Big Bucks for College...**

If you are one of the many parents who help finance your child's college education, it's appropriate that you maintain a closer watch over academic performance than you otherwise would if your young adult independently finances his

or her education apart from your help. Still, there's a fine line to walk here. Don't try to micromanage your child's education as she or he needs to learn the key adult skills involved in managing her or his own life. As painful as this process might be for you, it includes lessons your young adult will learn from the consequences of poor choices. On the other hand, you're making a financial investment in your child's life, so you won't want to throw tens of thousands of dollars down the drain on behalf of a student who doesn't take academic responsibilities seriously. Again, I know it's a fine line, but you'll need to learn how to walk it gracefully.

Perhaps the best thing you can do in this area is to work together with your son or daughter to negotiate and establish appropriate educational and behavioral expectations regarding the college experience as well as consequences for consistently not meeting those agreed upon expectations. Under the right circumstances, one such consequence might include cutting off financing. Establishing such an agreement, or *contract* if you will, helps your child understand their obligations and serves to build maturity and responsibility they'll need in adult life. But, do yourself and your child a favor: Don't try to include every lifestyle issue or choice you want your young adult to make in the agreement. The idea behind the agreement isn't to maintain control or evoke obedience to you, but to ensure a reasonable amount of accountability for your financial investment. Don't use the threat of cutting off educational funding as a big hammer that is constantly held over your child's head. Nothing good will come of this. It will only serve to strain the relationship between you and your son or daughter.

### **Academic Expectations**

Let's face it, not all kids are equally smart. Not all kids can pull straight A's in college no matter how hard they apply themselves academically. Part of your job as the parent of a college student is to apply wisdom in determining what *reasonable* academic expectations should be for your son or daughter and finding the right balance between providing the encouragement they need and a figurative kick in the pants when necessary. For example, the student who applies himself or herself and works diligently but doesn't get great grades may need a softer approach than the student who demonstrates poor study habits, and a lazy work ethic, but manages to get above average grades.

Before your child heads off to college, if you know that they will find it difficult to adapt to the rigors of college academics, make sure you have conversations with your young adult about this issue. If they need help with acquiring improved study skills or habits, for example, help them chart out a plan for building the skills they need or for becoming a more disciplined student. While not every potential academic challenge can be handled completely before your student begins college, your role is to help evaluate likely challenges and encourage them to be proactive in addressing them.

### **Living at Home With Your College Student**

While many young adults leave home to attend college, some students will attend a nearby school and make the choice to live at home when they embark on their college journey. If your son or daughter lives at home while they attend college, you'll need to make some adjustments to your living arrangement that otherwise wouldn't be part of your daughter's or son's experience if they were away from home living on campus.

Remember, your parenting goal. You want your child to become an adult. When your son or daughter attends college, but still lives at home, don't block his or her pathway to adulthood. Don't force your student to remain a child by maintaining the same expectations you had when they were children. Now is the time to revisit and renegotiate living expectations. Give your live-at-home college student some extra space. Make it easier for them to spread their wings and learn to fly. For example, if your son or daughter were living on campus, you likely would not always require them to tell you where they are and what they're doing.

This, however, is not the time to remove all expectations from your young adult while they live at home. Some parents have chosen to give their live-at-home college student complete autonomy with few responsibilities at home.

This isn't wise. After all, if your young adult were living on campus, they would still have some life responsibilities in addition to their education such as handling finances, laundry, and meals. So, make sure that your live-at-home college student will still have some of these types of responsibility. It's completely appropriate to expect your young adult to do some household chores (laundry, meal preparation), participate in appropriate family obligations, or even hold a part-time job in return for their home-based room and board.

Seek to keep your expectations reasonable and work with your son or daughter to reach an agreement acceptable to everyone. Many families find it beneficial to create a living-at-home *contract* that outlines all expectations, responsibilities, and consequences for not keeping the contract. The key here is not to simply present a ready-made contract for your daughter's or son's signature, but to work together with her or him to reach a consensus on the stipulations of the contract.

### **Home for Breaks and Summer Vacations**

If your young adult lives on campus, of course, they'll be returning home from time to time for school breaks and most likely, summer vacation. Much of what has been written above regarding college students who live at home year round also applies here, particularly in regard to summer vacations. But there are some unique distinctions for parenting when the student who lives away at college returns home on break.

When kids come home from college on break or for summer vacation, parents may anticipate life quickly returning to the good old family life of days gone by. But, wise parents will recognize that once a child goes away to college, family life will never return again to the way it was before. This isn't good or bad in and of itself, but it is the way it is, and part of the process of your child becoming an adult.

After returning home, (and once your daughter or son wakes up from their "big sleep" that invariably follows), parents may have as much as 48 hours before their young adult has had enough "family time." Remember, her or his life has changed since going away to college. They will be used to their own place and space to live, and returning home will likely put a crimp in their lifestyle. Most will quickly want to reconnect with old friends they haven't seen for awhile. They'll want to get out, revisit old haunts and hangouts, put away their student role, and have some fun. This new independence can be unnerving for parents, particularly for those who have had a close relationship with their kids in the past. But, for your young adult, it's completely natural. The goal here is to set reasonable break time expectations *for yourself*. Don't overly build up college break times as your *exclusive* time to spend with your young adult. If you get lots of quality time with your son or daughter, then rejoice. But, don't expect it. Remember, times have changed. Your child is becoming an adult, and much of the time while at home they'll want to do their own thing.

### **It's All About Relationships and Influence**

As your child becomes an adult, letting go can be a painful process, but it doesn't have to be. Sure, you've invested a lot of time, energy, and money into your son or daughter over the years, so it's natural to want the most out of your investment. But, your perspective in this phase of life can make all of the difference. So, I encourage you to view this time not so much as the end of the parenting years (after all, you'll always be your child's parent) and more of an open door to a new season of parenting.

As a parent, you still matter. In fact in some ways, you've never mattered more. But the parenting dynamic of what it means to be a parent and what you *do* as a parent must change. Now, it will all be about your relationship with your young adult and the subtle but very real influence you continue to have in his or her life during their adult years. Never underestimate your role. It's not about control anymore. But, it's about befriending, caring, loving, supporting, and being an on-call mentor to your son or daughter. And, as your child heads off to their college years adventure, you can lay a healthy foundation for a close knit adult-to-adult relationship that can be a legacy for you and a blessing for your son or daughter for decades to come.

