

Transition to College: Separation and Change for Parents and Students

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Introduction

Going to college is more than just "going back to school." The departure is a significant milestone in the life of a family and ushers in a time of separation and transition, requiring an adjustment on the part of parents, the college-bound teenager and the whole family.

College and careers

Students are apt to find their parents were right when advising them to get a college degree or at least obtain additional education after high school. In fact, those with a college degree will earn \$500,000 more over a lifetime than their non-degree peers, and even technical jobs will require advanced learning of some kind. But college isn't the end of learning, and students don't necessarily have to have only one set career goal in mind. It's fine to use college as a way to explore areas of interest while keeping in mind that the average worker holds 10.8 different jobs between the ages of 18 and 42.²

Adjusting to college life

The stress levels of college students have been on a constant rise. A 2009 survey of 40 randomly chosen four-year colleges and universities found that 85% of the 2,240 undergraduates interviewed experience stress on a daily basis (up from 80% in 2008).³ The increased number of students feeling stressed has been accompanied by an increase in utilization of mental health and counseling services; one institution reported a 29% increase in the use of counseling and psychological services in the last four years and another reported that 40% of the first-year students visit their counseling center.⁴

The impact of the student's move to college on parents

Moving on to college represents a significant step towards adulthood. Whether the student lives at home or goes away to attend college, the move represents an emotional separation for both parents and child. For most, the end of high school marks the symbolic end of childhood. This phase of life, especially when the student moves from home, is often referred to as "the empty nest." Many parents talk enthusiastically about the changes - they feel less constrained, have more free time and no longer endure loud music or competition for the phone, computer or car. But a sense of loss is apparent in comments such as, "It's so quiet around here" or, "I can't believe how much less I spend on groceries."

Challenges for parents

Feeling a void

Feelings of emptiness characterize this stage of separation - there is vacant time and cleaned-out rooms. Parents may feel unprepared or uncomfortable without their roles as primary caretaker and protector. Parenting is a tough business and a double-edged sword; successful parenting requires devoting one's life to a totally dependent being to ensure a safe, independent departure into the world - leaving parents behind. Joy may be mixed with longing as the young adult takes flight from home base.

Feeling left out

Adjusting to being on the outside can be difficult when parents are no longer needed in the same ways. Even though students may have been somewhat independent while still under their care, supervision and roof, once in college parents are less privy to every aspect of their child's life; they no longer know the details of their son's or daughter's whereabouts and are not able to pass judgment on all their friends.

Relinquishing control

It is necessary to give up some parental control. Whether it's giving advice about selecting courses or drinking, parents have to come to realize that young adults must make their own decisions. Relationships grow and change as children grow and change.

What parents can do

- Redirect time and energy previously focused on the child. Taking stock of personal interests and assets will reveal areas of life that may have been neglected. It can be time to develop, reawaken and pursue old and new hobbies, leisure activities and careers.
- As they play a new role in their child's life, parents must readjust their identity as parents and as a couple. The goal is to develop an adult-to-adult aspect of the parent-child relationship. Children always need parents, but the relationship may become more peer-like. Accepting that adult children want more privacy in certain areas of their lives is part of this process. If there are other children still at home, the entire family structure will change.
- Ideally, discussions about values, which have occurred throughout the child's life, serve as a foundation. Before the send-off however, it is useful to re-discuss specific issues, since college students are usually confronted with situations involving sex, drugs and alcohol, as well as tough academic and interpersonal issues. Without moralizing or criticizing, even young adults benefit from hearing their parents' views on these issues.
- Address individual needs. Parents should investigate and inquire about available resources. Arranging for necessary services for a student with a learning disability, mental illness or physical condition should be done preventively. College staff are specially trained to work with students of this age and these specialists should be identified prior to arrival.
- In the event of a crisis, it is preferable to support the student's own coping and problem-solving abilities rather than to rush in as savior, however difficult it is to hear cries of distress. Crises described from afar often sound worse than they are and can often change dramatically in the course of a few minutes or days. Parents, however, know their child best and must assess when their child needs their more direct help.
- Guide rather than pressure. Communicating educational goals and expectations should be done in a manner respectful of the student's own style and interests. College students need to pursue their own passions. Although parental input can be useful, children should not be expected to live out their parents' dreams. Focusing on "my daughter the doctor" or "my son the lawyer" is unproductive. Parents must allow for the candlestick maker to emerge if that's what is best. College should be a time of self-discovery, even if the process is marked by some fits and starts.
- Plan ahead. In addition to all the details of hauling stuff off to campus and buying just the right desk lamp, deciding about such things as checking accounts, phone cards and spending money before hitting the road is useful.
- Determine appropriate expectations and guidelines and be explicit. Parents should anticipate future events and discuss issues such as curfews, financial contributions and roommate arrangements with romantic partners directly with the young adult. If parents expect or want a weekly phone call, they must say so. If parents and students want to spend a particular holiday together, they should plan ahead.

- Allow for mistakes. Parents must encourage and accept the child's ability to make independent decisions. Both the college student and the parents must realize mistakes will be made along the way - it's called life experience. Learning from mistakes is another type of learning.

The impact of college on the student

College provides a time of socially recognized independence from parental rules and restrictions. Although the legal age of adulthood varies for such things as voting and drinking, going to college is an obvious sanctioned move towards independence. However, independence is not conferred automatically at a certain age or in a specific place. It is achieved by practicing how to think for oneself and take responsibility for one's actions. College students can feel invincible and able to take risks. But both the opportunities and the consequences can be high. The college freshman will be confronted with abundant pressures related to social situations - sex, drugs and alcohol. With respect to academics, students today are feeling increasing pressure to know what they want to do, pick a career path and plan for their futures. This pressure is causing unfortunate substance abuse, [anxiety](#) and even [depression](#).

Challenges for the college student

Fitting in

It can be daunting to leave the security of family and friends. When going to college, students often must leave, or give up, one group (of family and friends) then accommodate and learn about a new group. It can be stressful to analyze new social norms, learn a new set of behaviors, and consider adopting a particular identity and group affiliation. The opportunities can be exhilarating, but the choices should not be made hastily.

Balancing socializing and working

College offers an assortment of opportunities for advancement and distraction - there are so many potential friends, parties, courses, things to do and places to go. Not knowing what direction is best and not wanting to miss out on anything, students often try to be included in everything.

Knowing when help is needed

Students often doubt their ability to handle their course work and may be bothered by new and unexpected feelings, precipitating a downward spiral. There is also an increased risk of certain disorders in the teen and young adult years (e.g. [depression](#), [manic depressive illness](#) and [anorexia](#)). Students may find themselves seeking out a mental health professional for the first time. The right help at the right time can prevent problems from snowballing.

What the college student can do

- Explore new interests, discover new place, and meet new people. These experiences contribute to college life, but getting an education should remain the student's foremost purpose.
- Before committing to any one group or trend, students should take their time getting to know other students, investigating different activities and deciding what makes them feel most comfortable. Affiliations change a great deal over the course of the first year as students become more knowledgeable and confident.

- Participate and prioritize. No one can do everything. When students narrow their focus they often feel less overwhelmed. Finding a passion is one of the most exciting aspects of the college experience.
- Personalize the experience. It's easy for students to feel lost in the crowd. Students who take responsibility for their education by seeking out particular adults often have the best experience. Getting to know professors will personalize college and help the student feel connected to an institution that may seem impersonal.
- Be patient. It takes time to understand the rhythm of a new academic life and for students to develop a personal learning/studying style. Over the first semester it becomes easier to understand the flow of work and realize how to accommodate different teachers' standards and course requirements.
- Evaluate the fit. Assessing how expectations meet reality during the first year is a necessary process. Some disappointment or surprises are not unusual and may require some fine tuning, such as adjusting one's course load, changing majors and/or rethinking involvement in activities. Sometimes a school turns out to be different from what was anticipated or students learn more about what will truly suit their needs. Students should get guidance and explore options and certainly consider changing schools if that's what seems best.
- Never ignore a problem. Both academic and emotional challenges are most successfully managed early when small.
- Know where to turn for help. Almost all institutions of higher learning provide a school counseling and/or wellness center where students can seek confidential guidance and advice from a variety of sources. Ask about the services that are offered and make use of them. Sometimes simply talking about a problem can make it more manageable, especially if the conversation is with an individual who is removed from the situation - be it a college counselor, academic advisor, religious counselor or clergy member, team coach, primary care practitioner, resident advisor, house master, sorority mom, etc.

Advice for both parents and students

Expect ups and downs

One minute college students are the models of independence, the next they call in tears. Parents may also try too hard to advise from afar. This back and forth is natural and expected, as both students and parents become more comfortable and confident in the ability of students to handle situations on their own.

Stay connected

Little things do count. There can be some truth to "absence makes the heart grow fonder," but parents may worry that "out of sight means out of mind." So parents and students need to determine ways to stay involved in each other's lives and remember to say and do the little things that remind someone of their love. Cards sent home, care packages sent to school, pictures of events that were missed, and e-mail provide a way to stay connected and involved.

Transition to College Course at NYU

Recognizing that many first year college students are not fully prepared for the emotional upheaval they will experience, the NYU Child Study Center, along with the Steinhardt School of Education, has developed a course to address this transition head-on. The course, entitled "Transition to College and Young Adulthood," is taught every semester and is open to all undergraduate students at New York University.

References

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