



How Parents Adjust to Students Moving to College

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.

<https://med.nyu.edu/child-adolescent-psychiatry/news/csc-news/2015/transition-college-separation-and-change-parents-and-students>