

FAMILY MATTERS



Although your son or daughter is the one who is starting college, as a parent, you are also embarking on a new journey and a new phase of parenthood. Whether it's your first try at parenting a college student or you bring years of experience to the task, a few time-tested suggestions may help to ease the way.

Parenting a College Student

■ parents.osu.edu/admitted.html

In sending a child off to college, parents and other family members are faced with moments of both intense joy and sadness. From the time the first child leaves home until the time the last one empties the nest, a family is involved in a “launching” process. Depending on the family, launching can be a short or long span of time during which the home front keeps changing. Our young adults leave, they come back—and they may even bring with them prospective new members of the family!

It's a tremendous time of change for everyone involved. If it's any consolation, the launching period is recognized as one of the most stressful times in the life cycle of a family. Family relationships may require frequent renegotiation, and new patterns of communication often emerge to keep everyone connected.

As family members, we want to be helpful and supportive to our college students and careful not to intrude in the learning process that will lead them toward becoming happy, healthy, and productive adults. This may be an appropriate time to remember that all the love, support, and sacrifice we've given our children was to achieve just this goal: to have them leave the nest and successfully make it on their own.

So what's a parent to do? Maybe it's best to hear it from someone who has recently been through it. These suggestions for being a supportive parent of a new college student are adapted from writings of a student recently graduated from college.

Thanks to the National Orientation Directors Association for sharing the original text from which this was adapted.

Don't ask 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 one of the first weekends and asked, ‘Are you homesick?’ Then it hit me.”)

The first few days/weeks of school are activity-packed and friend-jammed and the challenge of meeting new people and adjusting to a new situation takes a majority of a new student's time and concentration. So, unless they're reminded of it (by a well-meaning parent), they'll probably be safe to escape the loneliness and frustration of homesickness. Even if they don't tell you during those first few weeks, they really do miss you.

Write (even if they don't write back)

Although freshmen are typically eager to experience all the away-from-home independence they can in those first weeks, most are still eager for family ties and the security those ties bring.

This surge of independence may be misinterpreted by sensitive parents as rejection, but most freshmen (although 99 percent would never admit it) would give anything for some news of home and family, however mundane it may seem to you.

There's nothing more depressing than a week of empty mailboxes or inboxes. Warning: don't expect a reply to every e-mail you write. The “you-write-one, they-write-one” sequence isn't followed by college students, so get set for some unanswered correspondence.

While on the topic of communication, cell phone norms seem to work similarly. Don't be surprised to receive a chatty call interrupting you at any time of day but a guarded or quiet response when you've reached them at an inopportune time (which may be any time a friend is nearby).

Ask questions (but not too many)

College freshmen are “cool” (or so they think) and have a tendency to resent interference with their newfound lifestyle, but most still desire the security of knowing that someone is still interested in them. Depending on the attitudes of the persons involved, parental curiosity can be obnoxious and alienating or relief-giving and supporting.

“I-have-a-right-to-know”-tinged questions with ulterior motives or nagging is best avoided. However, honest inquiries and other mutually respectful “adult-to-adult” communication and discussion will do much to further the parent-student relationship.

Expect change (but not too much)

Your student will change (either drastically within the first months, slowly over four years, or somewhere in-between). It’s natural, inevitable, and it can be inspiring and beautiful. It may also prove jolting, particularly for unsuspecting families.

College, and the experiences associated with it, can affect changes in social, vocational, and personal behavior and choices. An up-to-now wallflower may become a social butterfly, a pre-med student may discover that biology’s not her thing after all, or a high school radical may become a college egghead. Take comfort in knowing that the core values of the person you sent to college are most likely to remain, even though the outside “package” may change frequently.

Don’t expect too much, too soon. Maturation is not an instantaneous or overnight process and you might well discover your student returning home with some of the habits and hang-ups, however unsophisticated, that you thought had been outgrown. Be patient.

Don’t worry (too much) about depressing phone calls or messages

Parenting can be a thankless job, especially during the college years. It’s a lot of give and only a little take. Often when trouble becomes too much for a student to handle (a flunked test, ended relationship, and shrunken T-shirt all in one day), the only place to turn, write, or phone is home.

Unfortunately, this is often the only time when a student’s urge to communicate is felt so strongly, so you may be less likely to hear about an “A” paper or a new friend. In these “crisis” times your student can unload trouble in tears and, after the catharsis, return to the routine, relieved and lightened, while you inherit the burden of worry. Be patient with those nothing-is-going-right-I-hate-this-place phone calls or messages. You’re providing a real service as a counselor, sympathetic ear, or punching bag. Granted, it’s a service that makes you feel lousy, but it works wonders for a frustrated student. Don’t let it ruin your day! While you’re pondering and worrying, your student (having had the chance to unload) has probably moved on and forgotten all about it.

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 that freshmen may not admit to liking, but appreciate greatly. Your student will get increasingly comfortable with your visits once they feel settled in a college routine; they might even reach a point where they openly express excitement!

Your visits give your student the chance to introduce some of the important people in each of his or her 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. Unannounced visits are usually not appreciated; preemption of a planned weekend of studying or other activities can have disastrous results.

It’s usually best to wait for Family Weekend to see your student and the university; that way, you may even get to see a clean room.

Avoid telling your student that “These are the best years of your life”

The first year (and each college year) can be full of indecision, insecurities, disappointments, and most of all, mistakes. They’re also full of discovery, inspiration, good times, and people, but only in retrospect does the good truly stand out.

It can take a while (and the help of some good friends) for some students to realize that the popularized perceptions of what college life is all about are not entirely accurate. It can take a while to accept that being unhappy, afraid, confused, disliking people, and making mistakes are all part of the college experience, all part of growing up.

It can take a while longer for parents to accept it. Not every college student gets good grades, knows what to major in, consistently has activity-packed weekends, enjoys the company of hundreds of close friends, and leads a carefree, worry-free life. The “best years” characterization isn’t helpful to a student who may at times struggle to feel confident and competent in a very busy and often competitive environment. Parents who accept and understand the highs and lows of a student’s reality can provide support and encouragement when it’s needed most.

Trust

Finding oneself is a difficult enough process without feeling that the people whose opinions you respect most are second-guessing you.

Of this phenomenon, one student wrote, “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.” Just think what it might have meant to hear those words in the first year.