

Transition to College: Separation & Change

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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 students 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. College students need to pursue their own passion, they 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 that big moving day; remember checking accounts; spending money; phone cards, etc.
- 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 need to encourage and accept the child's ability to make independent decisions. Mistakes will be made along the way – it's called life experience. Learning from mistakes is another type of learning.