

Beginning The College Years: Challenges for New Students and their Parents

The college years are a time of transition for students and parents. This transition period provides both exciting opportunities and stressful challenges.

It is natural for students to experience some anxiety when moving away from parents, siblings, friends, neighborhood, and everything that they have come to experience as familiar and safe. They may then be moving into an environment of almost unlimited freedom where they are confronted with the challenging task of making decisions for themselves about a broad range of issues. These issues may include choice of friends, alcohol use, sexuality, choosing a college major, and establishing their own values and religious beliefs. During this period of experimentation and exploration, students may also question the values that parents hold dear.

What can parents do to help their son or daughter during these challenging years? For freshmen, homesickness is sometimes an issue. What the student often needs is a reassuring adult voice who understands and tolerates the temporary need to return to familiar territory as he or she adjusts to the new college environment. Parents can affirm and encourage their son or daughter in their attempts to handle new challenges, and at the same time, be available for support when needed.

Students have the responsibility of trying to include parents in on what is going on in their life. Students may want to invite parents to campus to see what they are doing at school. This often can be reassuring for parents. Students also need to be realistic and respectful about financial issues and how they spend money. It can be helpful for parents to talk ahead of time about what they will and will not pay for.

It is important for parents to be realistic about their son or daughter's academic performance. It is important to encourage them to do their best and to seek assistance if needed. Their learning to work independently may be more important than grades. Let them know that you support their right to make independent decisions and that you are available to serve as an advisor when asked. Be aware that it is normal for students to seek parents help one day and reject it the next.

It is normal to have anxieties and feelings about one's children leaving the family nest. Parents may realize for the first time how much their lives revolved around their children. It is also normal to have mixed feelings when your son or daughter leaves home for college. In addition to feelings of loss it is normal to feel a sense of relief and to look forward to some time alone with your significant other or time to do things you may have put off while your child was growing up.

Going off to college is a very important step in a student's development as a mature adult. Their willingness to strive for independence and become an independent productive adult is a manifestation of the many years that you as parents have provided guidance and teachings to your child. Be proud of a job well done. Be good to yourself and take time to take care of your own needs.

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