

The Push-Pull of Independence

What's Inside?

We review the changing dynamics of family relationships and offer suggestions for communicating with your college student as he or she experiences independent living.

Your Changing Relationship

During the transition to college, your relationship with your child isn't merely likely to change, it's certain to change. New and evolving boundaries and major shifts in responsibilities may feel unfamiliar. For students, increased personal freedom seems at the same time wonderful and frightening — as they seek to find balance between their own growing need for self-reliance and their desire for the comforting emotional presence of a parent.

College students are navigators in the difficult waters that separate adolescence from adulthood. As they take more responsibility for their daily lives and develop life skills that are as vital as any academic coursework, it's important for you to remain a reliable source of support.

Helicopter Parenting

You're a caring parent who's involved in your child's life. Over the years, you researched and sought out the best programs, the most enriching opportunities, and always got your child where she needed to be, fully prepared and on time. You knew what homework assignments had to be done, when they were due, and made sure everything happened in a wisely prioritized and timely fashion. You regularly reviewed (and sometimes helped with) assignments. Perhaps you've also intervened on behalf of your child, with teachers, friends or other adults. You did so because you care.

Yet experts agree, when parents cross the line from caring to hovering, they inadvertently stifle their child's coping capacities. Fortunately, it's not too late to get your child on the path to practical and emotional independence. How? When you talk, allow your son or daughter to set the agenda for some of your conversations. Work on techniques to give your child the space to build his own resiliency and decision-making skills.

Fast Fact

College-age children still think of their parents as a primary source of support when times get tough. An mtvU-Jed Foundation study showed 63 percent of students would turn to their parents if they found themselves in emotional distress.³

Push Pull of Independence cont'd

A New Communication Contract

Parents and children both benefit from establishing expectations for communication while a student is away. Have a conversation before your child goes away to school about how, and with what frequency, you will communicate going forward.

- How often (daily, weekly, monthly, on an as-needed basis) do you expect to hear from your child? How frequently does your child want to hear from you?
- Many families agree to once-a-week phone calls. Work out a plan that fits your family's needs. E-mail works well, especially given how different a student's hours can be from his or her parents.

Quick Tip!

Students today are part of a new, digitally connected generation. Using email, instant messaging (IM) and mobile texting is sometimes less intrusive, and frees your child from the obligation of taking your calls when he or she may be unable to speak freely.

Rules & Limits

After you've sorted out how you'll communicate, tackle the subject matter by setting some basic guidelines:

- What decisions, challenges, choices or difficulties do you expect your child to handle (at least at first) on his/her own?
- On which decisions will your child seek your input?
- At what point and/or under what circumstances should your child ask for help?
- Under what circumstances would your child would want a friend or roommate to call you or the counseling center?

Productive First Phone Calls

The calls are inevitable. Take, for example, the story of the father whose daughter called him from 3,000 miles away when her car wouldn't start. When your child calls you for help, walk through the problem-solving process.

- Have your child explain the problem; don't interrupt.
- Offer cues: 'How can I be helpful? What do you think you should do? What options are you considering?'
- Help your child evaluate their choices, but don't choose for them.
- If they still seem stuck, ask, 'What do you imagine my advice would be?'
- Assure them with supportive words like 'I think you can handle this.' At the same time, let them know that 'No matter what, I'm here for you.'

Push Pull of Independence cont'd

Your child is experimenting with independent choices, but he or she still needs to know that you'll be there to discuss ordinary events and difficult issues alike. Students don't always know how much independence they can handle or how much support they will actually need. Be patient. Understand it will take time for everyone to find their footing in this evolving relationship dynamic, and design a new communications contract that works for the family.

Check Point

If you notice significant changes in your child's personality, don't discount them as mere 'growing pains.' Feeling sad, lonely, overly excited or anxious can be part of the natural transition. They can also be signs that need attention. For more information on the signs of emotional distress, turn to page 20.

