

Making successful transitions as your child leaves for college

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When I started college my parents drove me to school, helped me move in, and attended a few parent/student events. I wondered if they'd ever leave. Finally, we hugged and kissed, and they drove away. And with that I turned and sprinted across campus, beside myself with happiness, relief, and excitement. I was free and on my own.

Looking back, I realize my parents worked hard

the summer before I left to prepare me for this successful transition. They also took steps to prepare themselves for my departure. After all, I was their "baby" and their nest was about to be empty.

As departure day approaches, it is important to change the tone of your relationship with your teen, such that you become less of an authority figure and more of a guide. After all, your teen will soon be making the vast majority of decisions on his or her own. It is

important for them to begin this transition before they leave. I'm not suggesting letting your teen stay out all night and having full access to the wine cellar. You still need rules and expectations. But if they make poor choices, focus more on discussion and guidance than on consequences.

As much as your college-bound teen will be pulling at the reins, seemingly full of confidence, remember that they're also fearful and anxious about leaving home. When you sense this, reassure them that they'll be fine and you'll be there to help, if they need you.

So plan for regular check-ins, be it by phone, text, Facebook, Skype or email. Along with this, plan your teen's visits home. By doing this, your teen will have the

reassurance of knowing that you'll communicate regularly.

It is also important for parents to share some of what they are feeling. You want your teen to know how proud you are and how much you're going to miss him/her. Don't overdo it. If your teen gets the feeling that their departure is going to overwhelm you, then leaving will be more difficult. Share your more intense feelings with others.

After your child leaves, you'll have many different feelings, and most are normal and OK. Perhaps you'll feel depressed, empty and lonely. Or you might feel happy and relieved. Be patient, the feelings will get easier. If necessary, seek out the support of friends and family to help with your transition.

You will also have more free time now that you aren't going to games and monitoring homework. You need to figure out what to do. One option is to stay home and wallow in your feelings. Or you can find new things to do. It's your time to explore and do what you've always meant to do but couldn't find the time.

If your teen doesn't contact you as frequently as you'd like, try not to take it personally. Your teen is in a period of extraordinary change and excitement, and staying in-touch won't be a priority. Be patient and continue checking-in. Even if your teen seems disinterested and gives one-word responses, rest assured that your communications are helping with the adjustment.

When you do communicate, celebrate what's going well and offer to help with what isn't. Work hard not to judge and lecture. If your teen gets the message that you are there to guide rather than criticize, they'll be more likely to speak openly and seek your support.

When a teen leaves for college a family is thrown into a period of great challenge and transition. If parents and teens don't work hard to make it a positive experience, relationships can be strained or even damaged. However, if parents help their teens to prepare prior to departure and support them once they're at school, along with taking care of their own emotional needs, the likelihood of a successful transition for teen and parents is high.

In my next article, I will focus on how parents can help their younger children when their older siblings go to school.

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