

Untying the Apron String-----Tips for “Letting Go”

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Chances are, as you prepare to engage in the actual and final process of sending your child off to college, you will encounter a crescendo in your relationship like no other. It may be one that can be comforting as a few piano notes, loud as the bangs on a drum, or as unpredictable rhythms of a musical composition. The struggle between parent and child to “let go” of each other is a process that begins during labor and delivery and extends through the lifetime of the relationship and sometimes even well beyond that.

In our society it is socially sanctioned that somewhere between ages 18-21, the child-to-adult rites of passage begin. Colleges and universities have come to represent one of the experimental grounds for exploring and experiencing the tasks, activities, rights, and responsibilities of becoming an adult. Parents have the breath-holding challenge of standing back and observing their child apply, test, evaluate, and select the morals, values, and standards that they have been “spoon-fed” over the last seventeen to eighteen years. The physical departure of your child to college will come to represent one of the pivotal points in your relationship status with them, and likewise for your student too. Colleges and universities perceive and manage any enrolled student as an “adult” with all the rights, privileges, responsibilities, benefits, and liabilities that such a status holds.

Strategies for working through the “letting go” process: Loosening the apron string

- To maximize the growth of your new college student, it is necessary for you to manage your responses and interactions in a manner consistent with their newly acquired “emerging adult” status. You start doing so by gradually changing your perception of them as a “child,” even when they behave as one. You will need to remind them that they are now young adults, and their decisions and actions carry consequences that may have positive or negative outcomes.
- It is not unusual for your student to call you and demand that you come and pick them up to return home. Transitioning to college can be very anxiety provoking. Talk to them about feelings, fears, and concerns. This is a time to refine your listening skills. Talk less and listen more. Listen with your ears and not your heart. Be mindful of knowing when to “hold” your opinion, “fold” your opinion, or “walk-away” with your opinion. Partialize the problem by breaking it down and focusing on one or two things at a time. Before ending the conversation, have an understanding of what action your student will take by the time you talk again. Don’t take control of the situation unless it is life threatening or they have demonstrated that they have done everything possible to manage or solve the problem. It will be necessary for you to remember that in this new status role change, in some situations there will be nothing more you can do. As painful as it may be, you may even discover that the best thing you can do, is to do nothing. Remember, crisis provides an opportunity for change and change produces and enhances growth.

- Gradual change in your perception will lead to your emerging adult assuming greater ownership for their life. This will mean in your role as parent, you are transitioning from commander in chief to “consultant.” You will need to squelch the urge to direct or control. Instead, be a good listener and redirect the decision back to your student. Build their self-confidence by empathizing and reminding them of a similar time or situation that they managed by exercising good judgment and problem-solving skills. When they make a decision with an undesirable outcome, again, squelch the urge to say “I told you so.” Instead, focus your response on talking about what your student thinks can be done differently without commanding or controlling the process.

- One of the roles of a consultant is to offer options. Try not to be the problem-solver but instead a resource director/facilitator. There is not one problem related to the student’s overall academic, social, psychological, and physical success that a corresponding campus resource is not available to assist. For almost every conceivable problem a student may encounter, there is an established campus-based resource office professionally staffed to assist the student. Therefore, in your role as a consultant-parent, redirect your student to the appropriate office for assistance. Keep the resource folder you received during orientation next to your bedside and/or in your work bag. Use it as your reference/resource guide. As you already know, the college website can also be very resourceful.

- Establish clear and mutual expectations with your emerging adult about finance management, reasonable academic performance including communication of final grades, your visitation to campus, and their visitation home centered on frequency of visits. Address these issues early on as they tend to be the general problem areas. It is not unusual that your student may want to come home almost every weekend, especially if they are experiencing homesickness or are involved in a dating relationship with someone at home. Certainly, this behavior has the potential for limiting the kind of campus-based experiences that they could have. The downtimes of weekends are opportunities for making connections with roommates, suitemates, and others across campus. If this is a potential problem, talk about it and have a mutual understanding about the frequency of home visit trips. You may consider limiting trips home to one weekend per month. As their campus residence is now home turf, resist the urge to do surprise visits. You may be more surprised than you want to be. Therefore, tell them that you are considering visiting and give a time/day range. When you visit, resist the commander in chief role of firing one question after the other or commenting on what your student looks like. Be constructive in your communication, especially about room condition, roommates, and friends you will meet. Remember, your non-constructive comments can have lasting consequences.

- Remember, a good consultant is always open, seeking consultation for themselves in order to effectively support and assist. As your emerging adult’s personal consultant, the Psychological Counseling Center welcomes your call or inquiry for assistance, especially in the psychological/emotional health and safety of your student.

- Remember, your emerging adult lives in a supportive community of peers and countless professionals. Your student is “able” and “capable.”