

Understanding the Transition to College

What your child may experience:

For your son or daughter, college will likely be a period of intellectual stimulation and growth, career exploration and development, increased autonomy, self-exploration and discovery, and social involvement. During this period, your children may forge new identities or seek to clarify their values and beliefs. This may require an examination of self, friends, and family. It may also be a time for exploration and experimentation, and a period in which your children may question or challenge the values you hold dear. The changes your son or daughter may experience can occur quickly, as they begin to develop new peer relationships, gain competence in new areas, and learn to manage their independence. It is important to recognize that every child will experience his or her own unique set of challenges and adjustments, just as every parent will have different expectations for and reactions to their child's college experience.

What parents may experience:

Often overlooked is the fact that the college experience is a significant transition for parents as well as their children. As parents, you may experience feelings of happiness, excitement, and pride when your child leaves for college. At the same time, you may feel a sense of sadness and pain and have many understandable fears and concerns about your child's future and well-being. You may worry about your child's safety and ability to care effectively for him or herself. You may fear losing your child as he or she begins to function more independently and form deep attachments with peers. You may be concerned about how your child will deal with alcohol, drugs, and sexual relationships. You may also wonder how your child's performance in college will reflect on you as the parent. You can expect to feel a variety of emotions.

How you can support your child:

1. Although your child wants and needs to become more autonomous during this period, it is important for your son or daughter to know you are still there for them and available to talk about issues which arise. Maintaining a supportive relationship with your child can be critical to their success in college, particularly during their first year. If you and your child were not particularly close prior to their leaving home, it is still important for you to convey your support. You may be surprised to find that some space and distance from your child can help improve your relationship.
2. It is important to maintain regular contact with your child, but also to allow space for your child to approach you and set the agenda for some of your conversations. Let your child know that you respect and support his or her right to make independent decisions

and that you will serve as an advocate and an advisor when asked. Finally, recognize that it is normal for your child to seek your help one day and reject it the next. Such behavior can be confusing and exhausting for parents, so make sure to take care of yourself by talking about your feelings with your own support system.

3. Be realistic and specific with your child about financial issues including what you will and will not pay for, as well as your expectations for how your son or daughter will spend money. It is also important to be realistic about your child's academic performance, recognizing that not every straight-A student in high school will be a straight-A student in college. Help your children to set their academic goals; encourage them to do their best and to seek assistance if needed.

4. The fact that your child has left home does not necessarily prevent family problems from arising or continuing. Refrain from burdening your children with problems from home they have no control over and can do nothing about. Sharing these problems with your children may cause them to worry excessively and even feel guilty that they are away from home and unable to help.

5. Find out contact information for people involved in the various aspects of your child's college experience. These individuals may include academic advisors and deans, financial aid officers, and residence hall staff. If you have questions, or if a particular problem arises, call the appropriate person, but make sure to involve your child in a collaborative effort to address the problem.

How you can support yourself:

1. Recognize that it is normal to have mixed feelings when your child leaves home. Feelings of pain and loss often accompany separation from loved ones. It is also normal to feel a sense of relief when your son or daughter leaves for college and to look forward to some time alone, with your significant other, or with your younger children.

2. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions arise during this period of adjustment; develop and maintain your own support systems.

3. Do your best to maintain your own sense of well-being. This may involve eating and sleeping well, exercising, and setting new and creative goals for yourself. If your son or daughter has moved away to college, perhaps it is a good time to do some of things you put off while your child was growing up. Taking on a new project or hobby can be an excellent way to channel your energy and feelings.