

Changes You Might Expect

Most parents report the experience of sending a son or daughter to college as one filled with anticipation, anxiety, confusion and hope. By opening day of the freshman year, many changes have already begun to happen. The student becomes more independent, gains competence in new areas, and learns to develop healthy peer relationships. The college years are a time for a student to continue maturing and learning how to manage oneself and life in general. What does that mean for you as a parent? Here are some of the messages you may hear:

"Help!"/"Don't help!" - It is sometimes frustrating for parents to go through the growth process with their students, not knowing how to be helpful and receiving messages which are unclear or incomplete. Students may add to the uncertainty by changing rapidly by rejecting your help on Tuesday and actively seeking it on Wednesday. We've often heard about parents in great distress because their student predicted a poor outcome on an exam, but forgot to provide an update when the results were better than expected.

As a parent, it can be difficult to know when to help, when to step back, and/or how worried to get. Usually a parent's best guideline is to provide a steady, supportive home base while recognizing that there will be ups and downs in students' needs and expectations. Try to follow the leads of the students and encourage them to work through a problem with you acting as the coach or cheerleader. Help them balance their thoughts and emotions to make their best decisions. Let them know that you respect their right to make a decision and that you will serve as an advisor when asked. Remind yourself to notice and appreciate their new skills they develop; students often want their families to recognize their progress toward becoming adults. And, remember to take care of yourself in this "Help!"/"Don't help!" process that may cause you a lot of confusion and exhaustion.

"So whose decision is it anyway?" - Most parents have a high investment in their student's decisions. Problems arise, however, when parents are more invested than students. It can be hard to lessen involvement in a student's decisions out of fear that the student won't assume responsibility. The irony is that students often don't step up to the task of being responsible until parents step back. After all, it's easier to ignore problems when someone else is worrying about them!

Taking a step back as a parent is uncomfortable, and at times frightening, because there is no guarantee that students will assume responsibility nor that they will make the same decision as you would. The fear that the student is not accepting responsibility in the interim makes most parents lose a lot of sleep. There is, however, no need to walk away disinterested and/or frustrated. Consider providing a concerned voice ("We're interested in what you decide, but we know you have to sort this out for yourself.") and remind yourself that you are helping by working with your student on developing his/her own decision-making skills.

"College is different than I thought it would be." For many students, coming to Loyola means finding out what college and life are about. It means learning that being an English major is more than just writing poetry and that psychology isn't necessarily the major for all people who like helping others. It also means learning how to study and how often to study. Academic expectations are more rigorous than in high school. Students accustomed to receiving "A's" and "B's" have to work much harder to earn the top grades in college. They also have to figure out when they should be studying and how to motivate themselves to do so. Ultimately, they learn when to ask for help and when to resolve issues on their own.

Coming face-to-face with new challenges is common in college. Finding support in dealing with these challenges is equally important. The College has many resources (e.g. counseling, academic advisement, health education, and much more) to address students' needs. In their quest for independence, students

sometimes assume that being an adult means it isn't necessary to ask questions. Parents can remind students that asking questions and using available resources reflect maturity and that doing these things does not detract from their autonomy or growth as an adult. At the same time, parents and other family members can serve key roles in providing the support needed. Students tell us that it is important to know that their parents will offer consistent support as they venture out to meet the world. The influential role which parents have in the lives of students continues through college and beyond.

"I'm back!" - The first visit home from college is usually an interesting one for the entire family. Students may return home thinking that their newly found independence will be recognized and appreciated by the family. In contrast, parents and siblings continue to live in their usual style and generally expect that the established "house rules" will still apply.

Parents can anticipate that their expectations will differ from those held by students during those first visits home. Instead of creating a situation in which a battle ensues, seeking a compromise that honors both the family's needs and the growing independence of the student might be an appropriate goal. If your son or daughter is commuting to school from home, consider the ways in which his or her new level of responsibility and independence will be acknowledged in the home.

Describing the many experiences which students and their families will have during college is not possible because every family is different. The professional counselors at the Counseling Center would be happy to talk with you about your specific situation. Please contact us at (386) 822-8900.

Modified from: www.loyola.edu