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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

The College Transition

Children Move In, Parents Move On

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In the end—or in the beginning, depending on your point of view—it all comes down to the extra-long twin sheets, or the window treatment, or whether to get a wastebasket with a flip-top or a swing-top or no top at all.

After eighteen years of well-intentioned parenting, marked, if we're being honest, by a helicopter episode or two, we find ourselves on college move-in day on foreign turf. The dorm room sits at the shoreline of autonomy, that brave new world where our children can do whatever they want without us finding out about it. To torture the beach metaphor a bit: One way or another, even if it's merely a matter of picking what you consider to be ugly sheets, your freshman is going to find a way to draw a line in the sand.

Don't step over it.

Getting There

There are parents who swear that his or her child applied and got into fifteen schools without any help from mom and dad, and moved into a dorm at one of them without a single scene, because respecting boundaries was never an issue. Most of us know better. Applying to college these days feels like running a small business, involving everything from a marketing strategy to an excel spreadsheet of overlapping deadlines and expenditures. There's the travel budget, the building of an attractive resume, and how about those speed-dating episodes known as the alumni interview?

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It's enough to test a parent; it's enough to drive a seventeen- or eighteen-year old to distraction, which is exactly where they shouldn't be when composing those short-answer essays.

So we hover, admit it. The best of us devote a great deal of energy

to figuring out how to keep from micro-managing—how to stay on the reasonable side of being a parent, where words like “support” and “encouragement” and even that goddess of trite,

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“empowerment,” reside. Other, less disciplined parents descend into the kind of behavior that would make Donald Trump doubt himself: They treat the kids as though they’re incompetent from day one, which pretty much guarantees that the kids will find some subliminal way to

avenge themselves, to shoot themselves in the foot, process-wise.

Either way, application season runs headlong into notification and wait-list season, and suddenly, there you are, the parents of a newly-minted student at Pick Your U.

If pre-notification senior year seemed to last forever, the summer before freshman year lasts no longer than it took you to read this sentence. Before you know it, your frosh is communing happily with strangers—prospective roommates and representatives of everything from the dorm to the orientation committee to the advisory program.

You’re writing checks.

Your senior starts getting lists from everywhere, it seems, about what to bring and what not to bring to school, and for the first time, shopping at the big storage and supply stores seem as alluring as buying this week’s newest electronic toy.

You’re writing more checks.

Until one morning you look up from the checkbook and realize it’s time to drive or fly to school for move-in day.

Moving In

On a practical level, the most useful advice I can give to two-parent couples is this: Evaluate your relative strengths, designate an unpacker and a runner and stick to your jobs. There are two immutable truths to move-in—the dorm room will not be clean enough to be habitable, no matter how much you paid, and you will have forgotten essentials, no matter how many times you vetted your list. Your only hope is specialization. If you have more or fewer members in your entourage, adjust assignments accordingly.

On a philosophical level? The desire to say Something Meaningful will

rise in your throat like heartburn; do everything you can to stifle it. If you haven't conveyed your undying love and those immortal life lessons by now, it's too late—and if you have, you don't need to do it again.

Our daughter is now a college senior, and I still remember the tactical genius at the core of her school's move-in strategy. In the waning hours of the afternoon, my combined exhaustion and emotions made me feel that I ought to make a statement. The day had been all about practicality, from the scrubbing of unnamed substances off the walls to the purchase of an outlet strip. The bouncy resident advisor—is there any other kind?—had sent everyone out for a quick restorative bite to eat and instructed us to be back in a half hour sharp.

But the monumental event that is move-in seemed to demand a little speech, so I sat down next to my girl on that extra-long bed and took her hand, to reduce everything I felt for her to platitudes. Happily, I wasn't the first person to attempt such an error, because before I could get past the business about how proud we were, that jaunty R.A. appeared in the doorway to announce, "Parents out! Time for our first floor meeting!"

You could hear the imperative in the exclamation points. She herded all the moms and dads toward the exit, and moments later we were on the street, tired, dirty, sweaty, bereft, free to do whatever the heck we felt like if only we hadn't been too tired. But we'd been spared making fools of ourselves, and that, in retrospect, was a tremendous gift.

It was time to cede control, to acknowledge that college is not the end of a process, as it sometimes seems to be, but the beginning of one in which we assume a new role at the side of the stage. To be blunt, you can roll through move-in day, propellers spinning, and guarantee that your beloved child's defining emotion as he or she stares at your departing back is one of profound relief that you're gone. Or you can apply your finely-honed management skills to yourselves, and figure out how to cope.

Communication: Less is More

It's hard work, particularly once we get home and technology tempts us with a rich array of ways to inject ourselves into our children's lives. The biggest pitfall of freshman year, at least for us, was the moments in the day

that had previously revolved around our daughter – like the weekday hour between three and four, which had always been punctuated by her arrival home from school or our commute to some activity. Both my husband and I work in home offices, so her daily appearance was a little high point in the day.

That suddenly uneventful hour now seemed about twelve years long; the phone glowed, seductively, whispering, “Go ahead. Call her just to say hi. So what if she’s in class or with her new friends. Go on,” and it was all we could do not to succumb. Thank goodness we had a dog, who was, that first semester, the most frequently-brushed and frequently-walked dog on the block.

Technology enables us to share a hiccup with our kids if we so choose, and freshman year I preferred an iChat with our daughter to any of the

The quad call: a freshman walking from here to there with no one to talk to calls home.

Oscar-nominated films. But as she had more and more things she would rather do (which is the point, after all), the weekly chat eroded until it was almost no chat at all. I thought about my own parents, who had survived my four years of college on a

diet of five-minute Sunday night phone calls after the long-distance rates went down, and it hit me: Today’s parent has to acknowledge the appropriate distance between Us and Them, and not be so quick to step into the breach just because we can.

If you can manage the self-discipline—does your son or daughter really need to know that the neighbors asked after them?—you may find that a couple of wonderful surprises fill the perceived void. First, there’s what college parents usually refer to as the “quad call,” in which a freshman walking from here to there with no one to talk to calls home to report randomly on the new sandwich special in the dining hall or the odd things their roommates do. Second, you can indulge in the occasional spontaneous shout-out if you do it economically; it’s the deluge that makes freshmen less than happy to hear from us.

With Distance, Perspective

As the parent of an incoming college senior, I’d say that the past four years boil down to this: If you can manage not to meddle, you may find that your

child will occasionally seek your company or counsel. For us parents, happiness during the college years seems to rise in indirect proportion to the amount of time spent chasing it. Our children miss us, too; they'd just like to beat us to the punch in terms of saying so, from time to time.

I confess that I have ignored every suggestion I've made here. I have been a repeat offender in terms of undisciplined outreach, but I've been better than I imagined I might be, and I've _____
apologized for the other times, so I like to _____
think that we've achieved a fairly functional _____
balance. Along the way, an amazing thing _____
happens: Our children, who went off to col-
lege uncertain about things like laundry and how long milk keeps, start to
have informed, considered opinions on everything. It's a gradual, almost
imperceptible process, akin to focusing a camera lens: They become young
adults; if we squint up our eyes, we can almost see who they're on their way
to becoming. It's no less spectacular for being predictable.

Having stepped back,
I got a better view.

It's a new thrill, not at all like the way we felt when they learned to walk or run or ride a bike or sing a song. I listen to my daughter talk about school and friends and work and things I know very little about, like international relations, and I am overwhelmed in a different way than I used to be. One day, dissatisfied with tried-and-true expressions of affection, I blurted out, "Y'know, I would love you even if we weren't related."

I meant exactly what I said. Having stepped back just a bit from where my unbridled instincts might have put me, I think I got a better view of the young woman who happens to be my daughter. I like the perspective. I'm going to try to survive the coming grad school application process from an equally healthy distance, or at least to recognize when I'm failing to do so, and to adjust my position accordingly. Parenting seems never to stop, but neither do the transitions. Freshman year is the perfect time to work on your chops, because you're going to need them over and over again.

Karen Stabiner is the author of several books, including Getting In: A Novel; My Girl: Adventures with a Teen in Training; and All Girls: Single-Sex Education and Why It Matters. She writes "The College Insider" blog for The Huffington Post and is an adjunct professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism.