

Parenting 101: College Edition

Written by Story by Nichole Brophy

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As recent high school grads prepare to leap into college life, there are a few survival tips that can assist parents in uncharted waters.



"Graduating from high school and moving on to college is perhaps one of the most significant changes in a parent's life," says Laura Gauld, parenting expert and co-author with her husband, Malcolm, of "The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have." "It's the first time a child leaves home as a young adult," she says.

Preparing for the start of the school year and your student's soon-to-be independence is the prime way to beat a case of the empty nest blues.

Letting Go

"Parents are concerned about letting go," says David Bousquet, vice president of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs at Northern Arizona University. "For many parents, it is their first child going away to college, so it is a big step and they need some reassurance and insight into services that their student's college offers."

Bousquet says one way for parents to feel more at ease about the process is to attend freshman orientation with their student. At NAU, for example, students and parents attend a two-day orientation designed to address parental issues and concerns as well as get the student off to a good start. Typical of most universities, it is at orientation that students will meet with their advisor, register for courses as well as meet other students, faculty and staff. At NAU, the orientation also includes a special curriculum for parents that instructs moms and dads on how they can help their child make the most of their journey through higher education.

Parenting From Afar

Whether it be an argument with a roommate or complaints about a large course load, parents of college-aged kids should prepare for anything and everything each time the phone rings. The trick, Laura says, is to take a back seat when new minor problems roll in.

"We can get caught up in trying to 'fix' our children's problems as we did when they were younger," Laura says. However, she advises that "stepping in to negotiate disagreements with their teachers, friends and coaches" isn't the optimal approach. "Now, we need to step back instead and allow our kids to face their obstacles and see for themselves the potential for positive learning opportunities."

Making the Grade

Once settled into the college atmosphere, many students undergo a common realization: I now have to study, too? At each of Arizona's three state universities, students are encouraged to take a full course load, which consists of 15 credit hours each semester. "As far as determining course load, I think both the parents and the student should focus on what I call progress," Bousquet says. "That means that at the end of your first year, you have progressed to being a sophomore."

While a full schedule of classes can mean late-night study sessions and visits to the tutoring center, in the grand scheme of things it all contributes to the student's academic success. "When your child is encountering difficulty in a course, don't say, 'Oh, that's O.K., honey, you can drop the class if it's too hard,'" Malcolm says. "We need to let them know we are expecting them to do their best and try their hardest."



Homesickness

It is not uncommon for students who have gone away to college to be homesick. Bousquet recommends that parents encourage their students to get involved, stay at school and not come home immediately. "Those first few weeks of school are key as students make connections with

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other students and if you have chosen to go home for the last two weekends in a row, you are at an obvious disadvantage," Bousquet says.

"However, there will come a night, during that first semester, when you receive 'the phone call,'" Malcolm says. "When the reality of being truly independent hits your child and feelings of vulnerability and loneliness emerge." Malcolm says parents should take more of a supporting role during this trying time rather than managing their child's emotions for them. "It's difficult, but that's when your parenting needs to change."

Staying Connected

Many parents face the anxiety that once their student leaves for the semester they'll be out of the know. Contrary to this popular belief, many universities form networks for the purpose of keeping parents in the loop. At NAU, a popular form of communication with parents is via an electronic newsletter called "The Backpack."

"The name comes from the days when parents sent their students off to school with a backpack and when the students returned, they'd look through the backpack for notes from the teacher," Bousquet says. Once your student goes off to college, parents are no longer in a position to look for teacher updates, so universities like NAU and many others around the U.S. have initiated e-mail correspondences to update parents who are interested. Bousquet says that regularly updating parents on services at the university, events on campus and upcoming deadlines helps parents be better partners with their students.

Empty Nest 101

When a new college student's semester begins, in many ways their parents' schooling begins too. Learning to navigate a newly emptied nest can be difficult for many parents. Laura recommends taking on new classes, activities and clubs to keep busy and avoid self-pity. "Your own personal growth as parents will be your true legacy to your child," she says. "Don't neglect yourself. Continue to invest in yourself, to learn, to test yourself, and to grow as a person and parent."

Parent Study Session

These reads can help reduce the speed bumps on the road to your graduate's success.

"Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money" by Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller. \$18. Amazon.

"Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years" by Karen Levin Coburn. \$15. Borders.

"The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have" by Laura and Malcolm Gauld. \$15. Barnes & Noble.