

# Parenting a College Freshman

## From a Student's Perspective

Your student, along with two million others, is about to enter a time that is exciting; a period of joy, pain, discovery, and disappointment. These students are beginning an amazing four to five year journey. When they complete this journey they will be a different person than when they began.

And, like it or not, you're entering this period with your son or daughter. You'll experience the same happiness and defeats as they - second-hand, but just as vividly or achingly.

If you don't believe me, ask my mom. She watched and waited and worried through four years of ups and downs and in-between. She patiently accepted my progressions and my regressions. She tried, and sometimes failed, to understand my way of thinking, doing, and being.

And, maybe because of her, maybe in spite of her, I left college after four years a much different person than I'd begun - a much happier person.

So, my advice is: watch and wait and worry and accept and understand. Your children will be happier for your efforts. So will you.

Of course, no one can ensure that you'll completely survive your child's first year at college, but there are some guidelines that might help you make it with a minimum loss of sanity and a maximum strengthening of your new relationship. The suggestions on the following pages are: a) purposely subjective; b) written by a just-graduated student who, therefore, thinks she knows everything about college, and therefore, doesn't, and c) is based mostly on careful observations of mistakes and/or breakthroughs made by her parents and the parents of her friends.

At most, they'll prepare you to deal effectively with some predictable first-year conflicts. At least, they'll make you think about your reactions to them - and that can't hurt.

### **Rule #1-Don't Ask Them If They're Homesick**

The power of association can be a dangerous thing. (A friend once told me - the idea of being homesick didn't even occur to me, what with all the new things that were going on, until my mom called one of the first weekends and asked-are you homesick? Then it hit me.)

The first few days/weeks of school are activity- packed and friend-jammed, and the challenge of meeting new people and adjusting to new situations takes a majority of a new student's time and concentration. So, unless they're reminded of it (by a well-meaning parent), they'll probably be able to escape the loneliness and frustration of homesickness.

And, even if they don't tell you during those first few weeks, they do miss you.

### **Rule #2-Write (Even if They Don't Write Back )**

Although freshmen are typically eager to experience all the away-from-home independence they can in those first few weeks, most are still anxious for family ties and the security those ties bring. This surge of independence may be misinterpreted by sensitive parents as rejection, but I'd bet that most freshmen (although 99% won't ever admit it) would give anything for some news of home and family, however mundane it may seem to you.

There's nothing more depressing than a week of empty mailboxes. (Warning-don't expect a reply to every letter you write. The you-write-one, they-write-one sequence isn't always followed by college students, so get set for some unanswered correspondence.)

### **Rule #3-Ask Questions (But Not Too Many)**

College freshmen are "cool" (or so they think) and have a tendency to resent interference with their newfound lifestyle, but most still desire the security of knowing that someone is still interested in them.

Parental curiosity can be obnoxious and alienating or relief-giving and supportive-depending on the attitudes of the persons involved. "I have a right to know" tinged questions, with ulterior motives or the nag should be avoided. However, honest inquiries and other "between friends" communication and discussion will do much to further the parent and freshman relationship.

### **Rule #4-Expect Change (But Not Too Much)**

Your student will change (either drastically within the first months or slowly over four years or somewhere in between). It's natural, inevitable, and it can be inspiring and beautiful. Often, it's a pain in the neck. College and the experiences associated with it can effect changes in social, vocational and personal behavior choices. An up-to-now wall flower may become a fraternity sweetheart, a pre-med student may discover biology's not her thing after all, or a high school radical may become a college egghead.

You can't stop change, you may not ever understand it, but it is within you power (and to you and your student's advantage) to accept it.

Remember that your student will be basically the same person that you sent away to school, aside from such interest changes and personality revisions. Don't expect too much, too soon. Maturation is not an instantaneous or overnight process and you might well discover your student returning home with some of the habits and hang-ups, however unsophisticated, that you thought he/she had "grown out of." Be patient.

### **Rule #5-Don't Worry (Too Much) About Manic- Depressive Phone Calls or Letters**

Parenting can be a thankless job, especially during the college years. It's a lot of give and only a little take.

Often when troubles become too much for a freshman to handle (a flunked test, ended relationship, and shrunken T-shirt all in one day) the only place to turn, write, or dial is home. Often, unfortunately, this is the only time the urge to communicate is felt so strongly, so you never get to hear about the "A" paper, the new boyfriend or the domestic triumph.

In those "crisis" times your student can unload trouble or tears and, after the catharsis, return to routine, relieved and lightened, while you inherit the burden or worry.

Be patient with those nothing-is-going-right-I-hate- this-place phone calls or letters. You're providing a real service as an advice dispenser, sympathetic ear, or punching bag. Granted, it's a service that makes you feel lousy, but it works wonders for a frustrated student. As I said, parenting can be a thankless job.

### **Rule #6-Visit (But Not Too Often)**

Visits by parents (especially when accompanied by shopping sprees and/or dinners out) are another part of the first-year events that freshmen are reluctant to admit liking, but would appreciate greatly. And pretended disdain of those visits is just another part of the first-year syndrome.

These visits give the student a chance to introduce some of the important people in both of their now- important worlds (home and school) to each other. Additionally, it's a way for parents to become familiar with (and, it is hoped, more understanding of) their student's new activities, commitments, and friends.

Spur-of-the-moment "surprises" are usually not appreciated. (Pre-emption of a planned weekend of studying or other activities can have disastrous results.) It's usually best to wait for a Mom or Dad's Day weekend to see your student and the school; that way you may even get to see a clean room.

### **Rule #7-Do Not Tell Your Student That "These Are the Best Years of Their Lives"**

Freshman year (and the other three or four as well) can be full of indecision, insecurities, disappointments, and, most of all, mistakes. They're also full of discovery, inspiration, good times, and people but, except in retrospect, it's not the good that stands out.

It took a while (and the help of some good friends) for me to realize that I was normal and that my afternoon movie/paperback novel perceptions of what college was all about were inaccurate. It took a while for me to accept that being unhappy, afraid, confused, disliking people and making mistakes (in other words, accepting me) were all part of the show, all part of this new reality, all part of growing up. It took a while longer for my parents to accept it.

Any parent who believes that all college students get good grades, know what they want to major in, have every weekend activity-packed, thousands of close friends, and lead carefree, worry-free lives is wrong. So are the parents who think that college-educated means mistake-proof.

Parents that perpetuate and insist upon the "best years" stereotype are working against their child's already difficult self-development. Those that accept and understand the highs and lows of their student's reality are providing the support and encouragement where it's needed most.

### **Rule #8- Trust Them**

Finding oneself is a difficult enough process without feeling like that the people whose opinions you respect most are second-guessing your own second- guessing.

One of the most important things my mom ever wrote me in my four years at college was this: I love you and want for you all the things that make you the happiest; and I guess you, not I, are the one who knows best what those things are. She wrote that during my senior year. If you're smart you'll believe it, mean it, and say it now.

*By Jan Michelsen*