

PARENTS & FAMILIES

Parenting a College Freshman

Practical guidance for staying connected while encouraging independence

A new relationship begins

The first year of college can bring excitement, uncertainty, discovery, and occasional disappointment. Your student is learning to make decisions independently, while you are learning how to support them from a new distance. The goal is not to solve every problem, but to stay connected, listen well, and give your student room to grow.

A helpful mindset

Watch, wait, listen, encourage, and trust. Your steady support can help your student build confidence without taking away their responsibility.

1

Do not lead with “Are you homesick?”

Let your student settle in before naming the feeling for them.

The opening weeks are full of new people, routines, and responsibilities. Ask open questions such as “How is your week going?” or “What has surprised you so far?” This gives your student room to talk about homesickness when they are ready.

2

Stay in touch - even when replies are brief

Consistent contact matters more than immediate responses.

A short text, note, or care package can provide reassurance and connection. Do not measure the relationship by how quickly your student responds. College schedules are unpredictable, and delayed replies usually reflect busyness rather than rejection.

3

Ask questions, but avoid interrogation

Curiosity should feel supportive, not controlling.

Use honest, open-ended questions and listen before offering advice. Questions framed as demands - “I have a right to know” - can shut down communication. A calm, respectful conversation helps your student practice explaining decisions and asking for help.

4

Expect change

Growth may be gradual, uneven, and surprising.

College can reshape interests, friendships, goals, and habits. Your student may change majors, join new organizations, or rethink long-held plans. Allow time for maturity and focus on the values and character that continue underneath the changes.

Continue supporting without taking over

The goal is not distance. It is a relationship that changes as your student becomes more independent.

5

Do not panic over every difficult call

Sometimes students need a safe place to unload.

A disappointing grade, conflict, or stressful week can sound overwhelming in the moment. After talking with you, your student may feel better and return to normal while you continue worrying. Listen, ask what support they need, and avoid assuming one hard day represents their entire college experience.

6

Plan visits together

Connection is welcome; surprise interruptions usually are not.

Visits can help families understand a student's new community and meet important friends. Coordinate timing in advance so the visit does not conflict with studying, work, activities, or needed rest. Campus family events are often a good opportunity to reconnect.

7

Avoid calling these “the best years of their life”

College can be meaningful without being easy or perfect.

The first year often includes uncertainty, mistakes, loneliness, and changing plans alongside friendship, discovery, and success. Unrealistic expectations can make normal struggles feel like failure. Remind your student that difficulty is part of learning and that asking for help is a strength.

8

Trust them

Confidence grows when students know you believe in them.

Your student needs space to make choices, learn from consequences, and define what matters to them. Trust does not mean ignoring serious concerns. It means beginning from respect, staying available, and allowing your student to take increasing responsibility for their life.

When additional support is needed

Encourage your student to contact the appropriate McMurry office, professor, resident assistant, counselor, or the War Hawk Success Center. For a family emergency, contact Student Affairs at 325-793-4680. For immediate campus safety assistance, call Campus Security at 325-793-4666.

Adapted from “Parenting a College Freshman” by Jan Michelsen.