

Launching Young Adults into College

by

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We were not prepared to watch our son head off to a college 400 miles from home. Sure, we made all the financial arrangements, bought clothes and school items, and took care of his everyday needs. That part was easy.

We drove our son to campus, attended as many orientation meetings as we could, and smiled at him when we waved goodbye. Within an hour or two after leaving him, waves of sadness washed over my wife and me.

We were alone. No longer did he need us as he formerly did. Our son could and would take care of himself from now on. The 24/7 parental roller coaster came to an abrupt halt. My wife and I were thrown into a state of intimacy we had not known for years.

We had so many questions. Would our son adjust to college? And what would we do with ourselves?

The psychologist, Erik Erikson, revealed why the empty nest is such a difficult time. He remarked that between the ages of 40 and 65 years individuals need to master the developmental task of *generativity*, which essentially means taking care of another person.

The most common, but not the only, way to master generativity is through parenting. Failure to master generativity carries the risk of stagnation, the feeling that life is empty and lacking in personal fulfillment.

As adults are thrown into the empty nest, their sense of generativity is suddenly pulled away from them and they face a sense of stagnation if they cannot find alternative means to nurture others.

The family life cycle is a continuous journey of alternating challenges interspersed with periods of relative calm. The challenges occur in the first year of marriage, at the birth of a child, the loss of a parent, a change in job or location, reaching the empty nest, retirement, and loss of a spouse.

Launching young adults into their college years is both a happy and stressful occasion. I discovered that psychologists need also to use what they teach to others:

- Share your experience with other parents whose children have just left for college. Knowing that your experience is not unique can provide comfort.
- Meet parents of college graduates. Learn how they coped when their young adults moved to college and what their experience of the empty nest was like.
- Stay busy. If you were accustomed to being on the go from morning to night 7 days per week, find ways to continue to feel productive and useful to others.
- Get involved in a new venture. This is a time in life to consider how you would like to spend time in a meaningful or enjoyable way. Take up a new hobby. Join a social club. Volunteer your time. Or go back to school and take classes yourself!
- Consider the website – www.emptynestmoms.com – for advice from other parents.

Acting confident that your young person will be successful in college is one of the most important things you can do. Young adults pick up feelings from their parents and can be prone to anxiety when parents feel worried that their child “won’t make it.”

Just as important, parents need to demonstrate to their children that they, too, will adjust well to their new lives without their children. It is quite common for young adults to worry about their parents’ psychological health as well as their physical health. When young people are free from worry about their parents’ well-being, they can focus all of their energy on the demands of college life as well as the freedoms that college bestows.

So, consider the fact that you still are a parent, even though your child may be separated from you in a college far from home, and s/he still needs your help. Here’s what you can do to help launch your young one successfully:

- Let your college students know you miss them, but are not depressed and lonely without them. Convey the sense that you are doing well at home.
- Avoid the tendency to call your student on a daily basis. College students need a sense of distance from their parents. It is not necessary for them to share every detail of their college life on a daily basis. Calls once or twice per week for most students are sufficient.
- Focus most of your telephone conversations on their activities in school, not what is happening to you at home or with their old friends from high school.
- If your young person shows doubts about the ability to be successful in college, provide reassurance that although the first few months can be trying, you are absolutely confident s/he will succeed.

Expect that your college-age child will have some adjustment problems. Most students do. Problems occur with teachers, roommates, difficult schedules, and adjusting to the greater demands of college life.

It is important not to be the one to try to solve your child’s problems. What you can do is let your child know that he or she has choices in how to solve problems and that there are many resources on campus to use in solving them. Therefore, if your child complains about adjustment problems, there are many things you can do.

- Let your child know that adjustment problems are common and usually resolvable.
- Suggest that your child work with college personnel, such as the residential assistant, college counseling center or academic advisor to resolve various types of problems.
- Feel free to suggest alternatives to problems, but stop short of giving your student the “solution.” After all, students are in college to learn independence so they can solve problems for themselves by the time they graduate.

Now that our son is in his senior year in college, we can say we have enjoyed his college years. We have had some happy visits to his school, met some of his friends, and learned about his campus and studies.

We have also enjoyed our empty nest at home. Although this period of life initially seemed concerning, it has been a wonderfully rewarding adventure for parent and child.