

Parents of College Freshmen:

Don't Let Go Too Fast!

As adolescents leave home for their freshman year of college, their parents struggle with feelings of sadness and loss. To make things worse, popular beliefs about "letting go" leave parents feeling guilty for even having these emotions. "It's time for him to start his life," one dad told me. "I'm excited for him. I don't want my sadness to hold him back." Yet every year I get phone calls from worried parents whose efforts to "let go" conflict with their wish to be there for their kids.

Their youngsters are often freshman or sophomores struggling to adjust to their new lives. Some are lonely or depressed. Others seem to be developing eating disorders or are drinking or partying too much. Some have been hospitalized for alcohol poisoning. The parents are seeking professional guidance because, even though every instinct says they should take some sort of action, they are afraid that doing so will be bad for their almost adult child's emotional health. Most of the advice they get from friends, books and the internet tells them to let their youngsters figure things out for themselves.

These clients don't want to be overprotective, hovering "helicopter" parents who cannot let go appropriately. They are seriously concerned, but they think that maybe their anxiety is neurotic. The received wisdom of our culture is that when an adolescent reaches the age of 18 he is supposed to be on his own. (See this NY Times article.) His parents are no longer supposed to offer advice (which he most likely won't take anyway).

But surprisingly, there are other professional voices telling parents not to let go so fast. In 2007 George D. Kuh, an Indiana University professor, found that students whose parents were more involved were actually more successful at college than their "liberated" peers. The question, of course, is what kind of involvement we are talking about.

In the 1950's the psychologist Erik Erikson (1) recognized that between the ages of 18-22 youngsters need to develop an identity separate from their families. But he also understood that this could be a difficult time, and that a number of factors could determine whether or not this phase of development was successfully negotiated. Growing up and developing healthy independence involves making mistakes, and college campuses are often relatively safe places for those early steps away from parental authority. But as I explain in a recent post, this process generally works best when there is also a healthy connection to loved ones.

Several university websites offer helpful advice for this time when "I'm the boss of my own self" alternates with "Tell me what to do.(Another useful site is the CollegeBound network's "parent's portal.") Finding a good balance - one that is manageable for parents and growth-enhancing for students - is not always easy. It is also not a one-size-fits-all formula. While some kids are ready for full immersion in a separation experience at the age of seventeen, eighteen or even nineteen, others are not. And even those who are fully independent do better if they know that their parents are still there in the background.

Obviously, advice and guidance parents offer to their college aged kids is different from that given to younger adolescents. Helen E. Johnson, one of the authors of "Don't Tell Me What to Do; Just Send Money," (3) a practical guide to parenting college students, says that parents should not take on their children's problems, but they should be available to talk with them about the issues involved. In other words, a college student needs help discovering an answer for him or herself, not a parent's answer. But helping young adults find these answers can be complicated. On the one hand, we know them pretty well, and we have many more years of experience than they. We want to tell them what to do. On the other hand, they think they know everything, and we want to throw up our hands and let them make all of their decisions on their own.

This push me pull you struggle is not helped by current policies restricting a parent's ability to get important information about a student's functioning. While it is extremely important to protect a young person's privacy, it also seems to me to be a contradiction in terms to keep grades hidden from parents who might profitably use the information to make an assessment about their child's functioning at school. This was the situation with one young man who I worked with after he flunked out of his sophomore year. He had refused to sign a release for his grades to be sent to his parents and had proceeded to enjoy school tremendously - but not for the academic experience. He was having such a good time partying that he slept through his classes and did none of his homework; but his parents, who thought that they were supposed to "let go," knew nothing about the problem until the middle of the summer after his sophomore year, when they did not receive a request for payment from the university.

"He had spent his entire sophomore year partying," said his mother, tearfully. "He lied to us about everything," his father said. "He was on probation first semester and suspended second; but no one informed us. They're happy to take our money, but not to let us know that it's being wasted."

Furious, they demanded that their son return home and get a job. At that point, it became clear that he was struggling with psychological problems and encouraged him to begin therapy. They also set up a structure in which he began to repay them some of the money that had been lost on school. But the thing that was most useful for all of them was a new effort to find a way to stay in more realistic communication. Their son was

almost twenty-one by the time they started therapy together, legally an adult. But even an adult needs some connection with his or her family, as they all finally came to recognize. The link does not need to be severed - in fact, no connection is just as unhealthy as too much dependency. It's just a different kind of relationship than the one of childhood or even early adolescence. (Dr. Robert London, my colleague on the PT website has some more useful suggestions for parents during this period. Margaret Nelson, another colleague on this website, has some interesting data about helicopter parents.)

Here are some suggestions developed over the years of working with college students and their parents:

1-Set up guidelines for staying in touch. Once a week may be more than enough for some youngsters, even if it is not enough for their parents. More often may be better for some, especially in the beginning (although sometimes it works the other way - initially a youngster needs less contact, but as the semester progresses and she feels more settled, she may want to talk more). But staying in touch is not by definition neurotic. It does not mean a parent cannot let go. It is an act of responsibility, a communication that you are letting go, but standing by to provide support and balance. And, as one colleague put it, "by listening to their voice on a weekly basis, you can tell how they're doing - just as you could tell when you looked at their eyes when they were younger."

2-Give advices sparingly, but always offer a thoughtful response when asked what you think about something. When possible, ask what your son or daughter thinks (difficult for most of us!) rather than simply telling them what to do. And when you do offer advice, make sure you and they both understand it for what it is - your idea or your experience or your thoughts about what you might have done in their place, for example. When you are setting up a requirement such as that they get a job or cut back on partying, make it clear that this is not gentle guidance, but a specific demand. You do still have that authority if you use it wisely.

3-Try to stay out of administrative issues unless your child is in genuine psychological difficulty; and even then, make sure you have at least informed him or her that you are going to contact someone, even if you do not have permission. When possible, offer support, encouragement and advice, but let him or her negotiate with the school administration. Do not run interference when you think a professor has been unfair or a rule is unrealistic. This is one of the places where your child begins to learn to deal with the adult world on his or her own. Many times college students don't tell their parents about difficulties they are having because of their fear of their parents' need to take action on their child's behalf.

4-Recognize that your child is almost an adult who may still need help taking responsibility for all of her own care. Many parents make medical appointments for their youngsters when they come home for holidays. If at all possible discuss the need for these appointments, and encourage her to make them herself. But if it is

difficult for her, ask how you can help -- one client in her late twenties who struggled with tremendous anxiety wondered if things might have been different if her parents, rather than making her appointments for her when she was in school (because they knew how difficult it was for her to make the calls) had tried to help her understand and work on her fears instead.

5-Pay attention to signs that your youngster is in trouble. Eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, failing grades and other difficulties don't happen overnight and aren't a sign that a young man or woman is inadequate or bad. They are, however, signs of trouble and require adult intervention. It can be helpful to discuss the situation with a professional to decide just how to intervene; but do not be put off by advice to "let go." If your youngster is in trouble, letting go is not going to help him or her. Do not treat him or her like a child, but remember that there is no such thing as a neutral act in these cases. Inaction is an action, and is often interpreted by youngsters as a lack of interest or concern on the part of parents.

6-The most important thing you can do is try to maintain a communication loop with your college freshman. Ask about classes, friends, professors, activities. Find out what they are eating and when they are sleeping. Listen for signs of confusion, tiredness, or just plain not making sense. One time is okay; but more often (which is why you want to have weekly phone contact) may be a sign that something is not right.

7-Make a date to see your youngster. This can be hard when he or she is far away, but if there are repeated signs that something is not right, make the effort to see them. You can tell more from looking into their eyes than from listening to them on the phone.

8-Be brutally honest with yourself about your motives. If you are missing your daughter who is also your best friend, or want her home to babysit; if you don't agree with your son's politics or are angry that he has stopped going to church or mosque or synagogue; or if you are simply lonely and want your child back, then you do need to let go in the sense that you need to stop trying to control them. But even then, for your child's and your own emotional health, you need to find a way to stay connected.

References:

1. Erik H. Erikson: Identity and the Life Cycle. International Universities Press, Inc. 1959.
2. F. Diane Barth: "Clinical Case Study: Adolescents and Separation" in Psychotherapy Networker, 2002.
3. Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller: Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money : The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years. 2000

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