Supporting from a Distance

A Guide for Parents of College Bound Sons and Daughters

Counseling and Psychological Services
Parenting from a distance... 

...with rewards and challenges.

with both hopes and worries.
The Emotional Component

College is not just an intellectual task. For the emerging adult, it is also an emotional task. Therefore,

College is also an emotional task for their families.

- Empty rooms
- Empty chairs
- Chores and tasks
- Quieter: Friends, Music, Conversation
Anxiety

Of course, there is apprehension.

• How will they do with that roommate?
• How will they hold up in that calculus course?
• How will they navigate alcohol?
• What will happen with sexuality?

There is plenty to feel apprehension about.
Emotions are CONTAGIOUS!!!

Family members *identification with each other* reaches the point that it feels very much as if that which the student is going through the parent is also going through, and vice-versa.

The longer this goes on, without being checked, the more it *spirals in intensity.*
Preventative Measures

To keep feelings that are extremely intense from spilling over and causing emotional contagion,

*Discuss them first with the other parent or a friend.*

Such preventative actions will allow you to defuse your feelings and thus reduce the raw tension or other emotion from going to your student.
To Intervene or NOT To Intervene?

What is the Situation?

Where is he/she in his/her development as a young adult?

Autonomy vs Intervention vs Connection

In general, increasing autonomy over time helps personal development.

You’ve done this before. Remember?
First Steps and Emerging Adulthood: An Analogy

Toddlers wander farther and farther from parents and after darting away in a demonstration of newfound mastery, returning to the parent as if to be sure that the parent is still supportively present, but at a distance.

The parent is tempted to be apprehensive with all these explorations made possible by the newfound autonomy of being able to walk.

But the response that really helps natural development work is the parents' vicarious joy, happiness, and excitement at the child’s newfound mastery of the environment, showing all that

Autonomy can increase as self-sufficiency increases.
Developmental Milestones

The college years represent an important developmental transition point as students begin to shift their focus from peers and family, to their own identities.

First Year

• Transition out of the family home
• Shed high school personas
• Encounter new dimensions of diversity
• Begin to set their own rules and explore interests
• May attend to their own reactions with less influence by others.
• Transition through the doubts associated with adjusting to a new environment
Developmental Milestones
The college years represent an important developmental transition point as students begin to shift their focus from peers and family, to their own identities.

First Year
• Confirming or questioning choice of major
• may feel that their decisions are irreversible,
• beginning to connect their academic decisions to the careers available to them.

Sophomores
• Discovering new friendships can have more depth as they realize their own intricacy, but may struggle to take risks to allow these to emerge.
Developmental Milestones

The college years represent an important developmental transition point as students begin to shift their focus from peers and family, to their own identities.

First Year

- May begin to identify internally more as adults, having a clearer sense of who they are and what they desire from life

Sophomores

- May seek greater stability in their living arrangements and relationships, trying to establish their own homes with friends.

Juniors

- Look less to family to provide sense of stability.
  - less likely to come home for breaks?
  - more aware of their own development
Developmental Milestones

The college years represent an important developmental transition point as students begin to shift their focus from peers and family, to their own identities.

*First Year*
- Facing graduation: excitement & uncertainty.
- Trying to build sense of competence and purpose.

* Sophomores
- Reflect on what they have learned in college,

* Juniors
- Consolidating self-identity with a sense of meaning and clarity about their own strengths.

* Seniors
- Also a time of good-byes, to both friends and an important phase of life.
Developmental Milestones

The college years represent an important developmental transition point as students begin to shift their focus from peers and family, to their own identities.

**First Year**

Students need to be allowed free range to explore, which often means holding back some of those protective urges.

**Sophomores**

Mistakes are a necessary part of the developmental process.

**Juniors**

Discovering that they can take care of their own needs and problems is an important part of their growth.

**Seniors**
When College Students are Struggling…

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Regardless of how severe their struggles might be, your role as a parent remains important, and you can play a significant part in helping them restore their strength and sense of clarity.
Remind them that you’re there…

Clarify Your Support and Your Strength

… that you care, unconditionally, and that you are available.

However, sometimes, it is difficult for the student to feel comfortable approaching you.
Afraid to disappoint you

clarify that your love is greater than your expectations,

...and that you want them to be able to reach out to you if they need support during a difficult time.
They wish to protect you from the hurt, confusion, and worry that they assume you’ll feel.

Clarifications about your capacity to handle the worry are sometimes needed to remind your son or daughter of your strength.

*If you were ever to go through a difficult time, yes, it would be upsetting.*

*I can handle that, though, and I want to if that means being there for you!*
What You Can Do and Say

Attend more to **motivation** than demands. Resist the natural urge to **control**.

You have earned the opportunity to trust your daughter or son to navigate most challenges associated with college life.
Consider using language that will help them think through their dilemmas and improve their problem-solving skills. Sometimes, this approach simply involves reframing suggestions into problem-solving questions. For example:

**Instead of**
- You should…
- You must…
- Why don’t you just…
- I think you need to…
- You’ve been through this before…

**Try**
- What would help you to…?
- How would things change if…?
- What is keeping you from…?
- What pros and cons would emerge if you would…?
- What do you remember helping from the last time you felt this discouraged?
Sometimes,

Our strength emerges from the more fragile dimensions of who we are and who we are becoming.

Remember that “just listening” is often the best thing you can do when your son or daughter is distraught about something. Often, the fundamental problem is that they feel alone in their struggle; having someone be willing to just listen to that struggle helps more than you would expect.
Helping Questions

One way to help you listen is to rely more on questions that will prompt sharing than on answers they may not be ready to hear.

• How able do you feel to be yourself at Duke?
• Do you evaluate others in the same way that you evaluate yourself?
• Are you being guided more by your fears or your aspirations right now?
• Can you tell the difference between experiencing disappointment and being a failure?
• What do you remember about the last time you felt motivated?
• Which of your qualities do you most want to rely on right now?
• Is recognizing when you might need help a sign of weakness or a sign of strength?
Contact Counseling Services on Your Campus

Professionals at most universities are available for consultation to help you support your student. Whether you need help in encouraging your son or daughter to seek services or need help understanding the issues causing you concern, counselors at most universities are available to provide consultation.

LIMITATIONS TO Keep in Mind

• confidentiality of services is legally required.
• sometimes, a referral to services outside the university is the most appropriate action.
Other Resources to Keep in Mind
in the Division of Student Affairs

• **Campus Life**
  • Center for LGBT Life
  • Center for Multicultural Affairs
  • Community Service Center
  • International House
  • Jewish Life at Duke
  • Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture
  • Office of Student Activities and Facilities (OSAF)
  • Women's Center
• **Dean of Students Office**
  • Community Housing
  • Fraternity & Sorority Life
  • Judicial Affairs
  • Mediation
  • New Student & Family Programs
• **Career Services**
• **Counseling and Psychological Services**
• **Student Health Services**
• **Residence Life & Housing Services**
• **Student Health Center**

http://studentaffairs.duke.edu
Thank You!

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