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How to Survive Being the Parent of a College Freshman: Two Simple Rules

Submitted by Janice Wood

(Janice Wood of Orinda read the article entitled After the Dorm Drop, submitted by Jamie Anderson, in our September 15th issue and it struck a chord with her - in this article, she continues the dialogue.)

So you've dropped your brand new college freshman off at her/his new school. You might think that your job is done. In truth, it's just begun. To help you make it through, there are a few simple guidelines for your own responses to your college freshman's problems.

They will have issues adjusting to academic rigor, creepy roommates, and general troubles while learning how to live on their own for the first time. Remember they are young, strong, and smart or they wouldn't be there. It's you I'm concerned about, you and those sleepless nights you will spend worrying about your kid's well being.

When my son and my daughter (now in their 30s) first went to college I was so excited for them. We bought really cool, colorful sheets, pillows, comforters, little refrigerators, fans, extension cords, and nice new clothes; everything they needed to make them happy and comfortable in their new environment. The hardest thing for me was to change the way I parented. It took me a long time to come to the conclusion that I needed to figure out how I could both help them and keep my sanity.

I developed two rules. One for them and one for me. The first is for the student: "The Call Back Rule." And for the parent, "The Reassurance Rule."

Don't be surprised when your young adult calls you at 10:00 p.m., unloads all her worries (which may include financial aid, unreasonable professors, dire predictions of flunking out, roommates bringing in boys, and illness). My kids would talk, cry, or whine for an hour or so.

I'd get to bed at 11:30 p.m., unable to let go and sleep. Their troubles firmly clutched to my heart, I would lie awake for hours. But here's the kicker. I'd call them three or four days later to see how things were going. The usual response was, "Oh, I talked to the professor two days ago (or the R.A., or the counselor, etc.) and everything is okay."

This is when you tell them "The Call Back Rule." As soon as the issue is resolved, they must call to tell you. Otherwise, you are dragging around your kid's problems, when they themselves have already stopped thinking about it. And remember this: At 10:00 p.m. when you are settling down for the evening, college students are just getting ready to go out for the night.

The other rule, "Reassurance," is what they need. No matter the problem (except for incarceration, pregnancy, or entering rehab), the answer is "I know you can do this," or "What do you think you should do?" Also in some extreme cases, "I have some advice. Do you want to hear it?" That covers most everything. What they really need to hear is that you know they can solve the problem. If it's extreme, most colleges have great counseling departments that are virtually free. Let them know you are there, but encourage your student to solve it himself. My mother used to say, "No one every listens to me. I've got all this wisdom and no one listens." I feel the same way, but a parent's job is to help them get through it, not to fix it for them. That's their job.

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