

Spiritual Sanity

By Mary Rose Remington

Avoid Helicopter Parenting Your College Bound Kid

“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children.
One of these is roots, the other, wings.”
Hodding Carter

Twenty-one years ago I was pregnant with my first child and my husband and I were attending one of those ‘bring your own pillow’ pregnancy, labor and delivery classes offered by the hospital. As I sailed into the last trimester of my text-book pregnancy, I anticipated a normal, smooth, drugless and scalpel-less delivery assisted by my doctor who I had established a professional relationship with, and who understood my delivery plan. Although I hardly remember a thing about the class, I do remember the instructor’s cautionary words. “However you think your childbirth experience will be you’ll be wise to at least consider and prepare for a delivery that might not unfold that way.”

Sure enough, three weeks before my delivery date, my daughter flipped in my womb and stubbornly stayed breech (butt and feet down) despite attempts to turn her. I reluctantly scheduled my Cesarean and created more drama by going into labor in the middle of the night three days before my surgery. I had an emergency C-Section by a doctor whom I had never met (so much for the normal, smooth, drugless and scalpel-less delivery) but what a valuable parenting lesson: Hope for the best, yet understand it might not always go that way.

Years passed, and now we are sending our second child off to college this fall. For parents participating in this ritual for the very first time I offer these words of caution: “However you think the separation and launch will go with your child, at least consider and prepare for a transition that might not go precisely as planned.”

Drop Off Day Tears

You’ll pack the car with items your child needs plus numerous things they will never touch. Hopefully you’ll arrive early enough to beat the crowds, yet you’ll still end up unloading besides other petrified parents who will smile politely as they too pretend to know what they are doing. After helping your child make up their bed (be prepared to recite the differences between a mattress pad, a fitted and a top sheet) you’ll oversee the most important college connection ever: their computer and printer hook up. You’ll offer to help them put away their clothes (which they won’t accept) and soon the tension will grow thick as you recognize it’s time to separate. Naturally you’ll prolong the agony with your effort to rearrange everything according to Feng Shui, including proper placement of the dorm fridge and the cute little plant you brought, which will be dead in three weeks

from neglect. Your child will give you a knowing look, perhaps a nod towards the door. You might have to say your goodbye in the not very private parking lot now spilling over with new arrivals; parents and kids who are grateful to be at least 1-2 hours away from the painful goodbye hug. Expect that at least one of you will cry... it might start out as the graceful, hardly-notice-they-are-there-type of tears that are quickly wiped away, or it could progress into a full blown, hyperventilating, body wrenching sob. You simply don't know ahead of time how your husband is going to handle his grief.

Faith in Your Parenting

Karen Levin Coburn, assistant vice chancellor for students and dean for the freshman transition at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri is co-author of *"Letting Go- a Parents Guide to Understanding the College Years"*, a book that has sold over 300,000 copies. Ms. Coburn speaks to parents who pack rooms seeking advice on how to handle the college transition without becoming helicopter parents, those who constantly hover over their child.

"I don't know who coined the term 'helicopter parents,' says Coburn, but I do know we are seeing a generation of parents who have been more involved in every step of their child's development." She shares her advice, "Recognize that this is a big transition but have faith in your parenting. Your kids know the values you have instilled in them and they will be taking those values with them to college." Coburn also advises parents to "Take advantage of technology to keep in touch, but let the child set the communication patterns and don't expect answers to all your emails."

Greatest Gifts

Coburn understands that parents want what is best for their child, including being successful and independent. "If the parents can step back and really think about what they value in an adult, they will realize that the ability to solve problems is one of the key traits that we look for in highly functioning adults". When parents see their child going through a hard time, they need to pause and remember their greatest gift will be to teach their child how to problem solve, instead of fixing everything for them. A parents best bet will often be to refer their son or daughter to one of the many resources on campus specifically designed to help students: the counseling center, residential advisors (RA's are usually upper classmates paid to oversee the conduct on every floor and assist residents with concerns) dean of students, the professors, the Health/Medical Center, Religious/Spiritual advisors, etc. Check the schools website or information line for other resources.

Remington's Remedy

The irony of parenting is if you do your job 'mostly right,' you'll work yourself out of a job. Trust your son or daughter to connect with you when they need you. If nothing else,

you'll hear from them when tuition payment is due.

Mary Rose Remington, M.S.Ed. is a career counselor, life coach, motivational speaker and freelance writer from St. Paul, MN and mother of three. She is the author of ***"Career Quest, a Practical and Spiritual Guide To Finding your Life's Passion,"*** available at www.amazon.com. For more information about private consultations, classes or speaking engagements, visit www.maryremington.com. Email Mary Rose at mrose@maryremington.com or phone 651-457-1302.

Ten Tips for Launching College-bound Kids

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Do

- Understand the entire family will need time to adjust to the new family identity.
- Let technology help you keep in touch: Sunday night phone calls on family plan cell phones, emails, send digital photos, etc.
- Go beyond tuition and books in your financial discussion. Clarify who will be responsible for what: cell phone, personal care items, pizza, gas money and car insurance, etc.)
- "Get a life" and resist the temptation to smother kids still at home. Reinvest energy in your relationship with your spouse, partner or friendships. Volunteer. Get a job. Take a class. Redecorate. Write a novel. Get active in your church, synagogue or local community. Join a health club.
- Most colleges offer parents an e-newsletter. Sign up for that and the school newspaper to keep up with their world.

Don't

- Don't expect many calls, especially during the first few weeks. Your child will be incredibly busy meeting new friends, learning campus layout, joining new clubs, attending classes and (hopefully) studying.
- Don't say college is the 'best four years of your life.' Most freshman experience disappointments: failed tests, negative consequences from bad choices, broken relationships, etc. Just like life, college has its ups and downs.
- Don't panic and pull them out of school when they call and say I'm homesick, I hate my roommate and the cafeteria food sucks. Listen, and then ask if they'd like help creating solutions to their problems. (Key word: THEIR problems)
- Don't expect them to get the same grades they got in high school, at least not immediately.
- Don't guilt them into coming home every weekend. Tell them (once) they are welcome home anytime, and let them design their schedule.

