

A Few Pointers for Keeping the Communication Going

Expect some changes. These years provide an important opportunity for growth for your student and for your relationship with the person your student is becoming. A college student may be trying out different looks, identities, attitudes, and aspirations. Show interest in your student's new experiences. Don't be surprised if your student who came here intent on majoring in one area announces in a couple of quarters that he or she is changing majors.

Resist the urge to solve problems for your student. You can ultimately be most helpful by listening to their concerns and guiding them through their own problem-solving process. It's more important for them to learn to develop their ability to cope with problems, than to depend on a parent's wisdom and advice. Create space in conversations for students to discuss their rationale for decisions they have made. Wait to offer advice until they ask for it.

Support their independent decisions without assuming it means they don't want or need you. Keeping in touch by email is usually a convenient way to communicate but expect that students may not write or call as often as you would like. Students usually appreciate little gifts or cards in the old fashioned mail as well. Before your son or daughter comes to college, talk about the means of communication that he or she prefers for keeping in touch with family.

Listen, really listen, and show that you are paying attention by responding to what they are saying with reflection of feelings and open-ended questions.

For example,

Tell me about your history class.

Which of your professors do you like most? What is it like to be in his/her class?

What is it like to be living in the residence hall?

What activities have you heard about so far that sound interesting to you?

Pay attention to what the student is doing ^{3right}² rather than areas where they are not doing well. Expect that grades for freshmen will be lower than they were in high school. Ask your student what he or she is learning in classes rather than emphasizing grades as the sole indicator of a successful freshman year.

Avoid blaming and criticizing. Guide them through the process of reflecting on their problem or concern. Think of yourself as coaching them in an important life and learning experience. "Gee, that must have been disappointing to have failed the chemistry test. Chemistry was one of your favorite classes in high school. It must be much harder in college. What do you think you will do to feel more prepared for the next test? (pause) I wonder if the Tutorial Center could be of help? (pause) Do you see any way we could be of help to you now?" (adapted from: Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money, Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller)

Don't dismiss students' concerns by telling them: "these are the best years of your life." These years can be complicated and confusing. Showing empathy for their struggles and times of disappointment can be a powerful support to a student.

Visit your student at NDNU. Even if your student comes home often, making a trip to see your student in his or her college environment can mean a lot. It's usually fun for students to show their families around their campus. Keep in mind that they will need to get back to their lives (study, friends, activities) so make visits friendly and not lengthy.

Encourage your students to take advantage of services and resources NDNU has to offer. There are many professionals here whose job it is to help students cope with and learn from the various challenges of being a college student. Keep in mind that we treat students as adults and cannot share information with you about your student without her or his permission.

When students come home for winter break or summer, plan for some adjustments for everyone. Students will be accustomed to a different schedule, a different social life, and more freedom to come and go. Be clear about your expectations, but realize that things won't go back to the way they were before the student left for college. If they speak of getting back "home" to NDNU, don't take it personally. It probably means they have been successful in creating a life for themselves here that gives them identity, purpose, and a sense of belonging.

Keep a sense of humor and hope you are both in your own life's developmental process. Be able to apologize if you say something out of frustration that is hurtful to your son or daughter. This can be valuable modeling to your student that taking responsibility for our actions can strengthen relationships and create a deeper connection. Seek out friends who are also parents of college students for support at crucial times.

Resources:

Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years, by Helen E. Johnson & Christine Schelhas-Miller, 2000.

Letting Go: A Parent's Guide to Today's College Experience, Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger, 1992.