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Ties That Bind

As college years begin, parents and students enter a new relationship

BY DAVID TREADWELL PHOTOS BY FRED FIELD

It's midnight in London. A student on the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin program there can't find a taxi. She calls her mother back in the States to see if she can fix the problem. The mother immediately calls and requests help from the Colby professor who's leading the program. The professor dutifully arranges for a car service to pick up the stranded first-year.

As the children of the Baby Boomer generation enter college, the scene above is less and less the exception. A generation that has been more involved in its children's lives than any in recent memory continues to stay involved as those children head off to learn to become independent, functioning, and successful adults. Aided by technology—from cell phones to e-mail to instant messaging—the more extreme of these attentive moms and dads have even given rise to a new term that describes their continued involvement in their children's college lives. “They’re called ‘helicopter parents’ for their habit of hovering,” a national education writer for the Associated Press reported recently.

There has been a sea change in parent-student relationships in recent years, one that has both college administrators and parents themselves wondering how much involvement is too much. At what point does parental support become counterproductive? Is there anything wrong with sharing the college experience?

Like parenting in general, there is no right or wrong approach to communicating with children who are away from home for the first time. Every situation—every child—is unique. But faculty and administrators who have witnessed vari-

ous situations, and parents and students who have their own approach to separation, can offer insight into what works and what doesn't. Is there a point when a close connection between parents and students crosses from healthy to unhealthy?

Vice President for Student Affairs Janice Kassman, who has 30 years experience at Colby, says e-mail and cell phones have dramatically changed the relationship between the student and the parent and between the parent and the College.

“And that’s both a blessing and a curse,” she said. “With instant communication, students sometimes turn to a parent to solve a problem rather than solving it on their own. On the plus side, parents have a much better idea of what their students are experiencing—the courses they’re taking, the friends they’re making, and so on. I recall a student on graduation day who, after walking across the stage, immediately called her grandmother on the cell phone to say, ‘Hi, Grandma, I just got my diploma!’ That one call alone overrode any doubts I have about the value of cell phones.”

Kassman advises parents to learn as much about Colby as possible and to keep contact while allowing children to maintain independence. The *Colby Student Handbook* and *Parents Handbook* offer a wealth of information about the issues that college-age students face as well as policies and procedures that outline Colby's approach to those issues, and Kassman encourages parents to be in the know. Many deans, coaches, and professors make themselves available to concerned parents, and students are more accessible to their parents now than

in previous generations. “Use e-mail to get a window into your students’ experience,” she said. “Don’t overreact if you see a problem brewing. Be cautious before stepping in to try to solve a problem. And above all—listen.”

Kassman also emphasizes that she’s always ready to do the same. “I don’t cringe when parents call. I’ll talk at any hour. We don’t want any student to fall through the cracks.” In fact, parents can reach someone in the Dean of Students Office at Colby at any time, day or night, if it’s an emergency.

But even administrators whose doors—and phone lines—are always open say instant parent-student communication can have pitfalls. Patricia Newmen, director of counseling services at Colby, tells the story of a student who called her mother after class, extremely upset, near tears. The mother called back that afternoon and asked her daughter how she was doing. “I’m fine,” replied the daughter, sounding perfectly happy. “Why do you ask?” The mother had feared her daughter was undergoing a major crisis when in fact she was just experiencing another small bump in the road.

“Of course students encounter challenges and struggles here,” Newmen said. “That’s life. And there’s a huge transition occurring between age eighteen and age twenty-two. But our students are remarkably resilient. They learn to figure things out and move on.”

And what is the parent’s proper role in the process? “It’s hard to know how long to let the rubber band stretch,” she said, “to negotiate letting go versus staying connected. My advice: be there, be

flexible, and listen, listen, listen.”

Mark Serdjenian '73, associate dean of students, talks of the “bittersweet struggle” parents face in learning to back away after nurturing their children for 18 years. “Parents can no longer control what life has in store for their son or daughter, and that can be scary. They know that their child will change in college, but they don’t know how. It’s really a fear of the unknown.”

Serdjenian acknowledges that not all parents adapt successfully to their new roles. “Sometimes a parent of a first-year student will call in the summer and say something like, ‘We are thinking of taking a course in biology’ or ‘We plan to major in economics.’ In fact, students must feel free to follow their own passions, to set their own academic goals.”

Although he occasionally must deal with an overly possessive or protective parent, Serdjenian says most parents do a fine job in their new roles. He encourages ongoing communication between the parent and the student and between the parent and Colby.

Athletics is a natural area for extended parental involvement in the lives of students. Parents of student-athletes enjoy an extra opportunity to stay in touch by attending games. And, increasingly, they do just that. “Parents think nothing of driving to Waterville every weekend,” marveled Marcella Zalot, director of athletics. “They used to set up tailgating parties just during football games; now we see them in lots of sports.” She estimates that at least half the parents of student-athletes regularly attend games, stay in touch with coaches through e-mail or by phone, or attend athletic banquets.

For the most part, Zalot views the increased parental involvement on the athletic scene as a positive development. She does, however, point out that there is a fine line between involvement and intrusion. “Let your students make their own mistakes and learn from them,” Zalot said. “It’s their path, not yours.”

Some professors at Colby look less favorably upon frequent student-parent contact than do administrators. “Constant student-parent communication prolongs adolescence,” cautioned Tom Morrione '65, Charles



Beverly and Michael Wilson are in touch with their daughter, Naomi '07, daily with e-mail and instant messaging or by phone.

A. Dana Professor of Sociology. “Sometimes that’s necessary, but often it is not. Students should get unplugged from cell phones for a while; it’s a different experience and different experiences are good.”

Morrione readily admits that times have changed drastically since he lived in Averill Hall 40 years ago. “The one phone on the floor rang endlessly,” he recalled, “and students endlessly did *not* answer it.” He also recognizes that constant cell phone use has become the norm and that it’s difficult, often stressful, for students and/or parents to break the habit.

Jonathan Weiss, NEH/Class of 1940 Distinguished Professor of Humanities in the Department of French and Italian, takes a softer stance. As head of Colby’s Dijon program for years, Weiss recognizes the importance of student-to-parent accessibility, especially during the first semester. He enjoys regular contact with first-year parents while he is on overseas programs, particularly communication concerning the students’ overall welfare, not purely academic matters.

Still, Weiss understands the pitfalls of the cell phone crutch. “We took a hike in the Alps, and just as we were coming down the mountain a student’s cell phone rang. I wish we hadn’t had that intrusion.” Weiss

also wonders about the mother of a first-year student who called her daughter in Europe every night to read a bedtime story.

But Weiss did confess that he does not always practice what he preaches. “I’m constantly trying to resist the temptation to call my son at Trinity!”

Fernando Gouvêa, professor of mathematics, reports that parents seem to intervene directly only during the first year. “When I’m doing first-year advising, I often run up against ‘but my mother said’ arguments,” he said. “For example, there’s ‘My mother said I should take the easier calculus course so that I can get good grades and get into med school.’ I tell them that that strategy rarely works.”

Another professor, who requested anonymity, said that his only negative experiences with parents involve their putting excessive pressure on students over grades or choice of majors. “These parents are the exception,” he noted, “but I see one a semester.”

On a more positive note, Tom Berger, Carter Professor of Mathematics, says that he’s had many favorable interactions with parents, and they are not unusual. One parent even thought enough to endow a scholarship to Colby in Berger’s name.

Michael Wilson admits that he and his wife, Beverly, were mentally but not emotionally prepared for life without their only child, Naomi '07, living at home. “It was lonelier than we had anticipated,” he said. “Life is not the same when you’re living with just your dog and cat.”

Wilson laughs when he compares the contact he had with his own parents during his college years with the communication he maintains with Naomi. “My parents were lucky to get a call or a letter once every two or three weeks. We’re in touch with Naomi perhaps twice a day, if you count e-mails and instant messages.”

This connected father is delighted with the communication he’s had with Colby. “The attentiveness of the faculty has exceeded our expectations, the coaches are exemplary, and Naomi has become more independent, just as we had hoped she would.”

Naomi, too, is delighted with Colby—and with the regular contact with her parents. “I

WHEN PARENTS BECOME MENTORS

When Karen Levin Coburn P'93 began writing about parents "letting go" of their college students, letting go was easier to do.

Coburn, assistant vice chancellor for students and dean for the freshman transition at Washington University in St. Louis, is the co-author of *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years*. The book, now in its fourth edition, was originally published in 1997. That's before cell phones became ubiquitous. Before e-mail was at our fingertips. Before children—and moms and dads—were an instant message away.

Today's technology has exacerbated a sometimes difficult challenge: allowing children to grow independent and successful while wishing to save them the tribulations that can be part of the process. Levin's advice is simple and commonsensical: "It doesn't mean you cut off the connection," she said. "It means you don't jump in and do everything for them just because you can."

Her book was distributed last year to all of the parents of the in-

coming Class of 2008 by David and Pamela Maltz P'05, who found that it addressed issues they were facing as two of their children went off to college for the first time.

"We had to deal with the idea of letting the kids go and grow up," David Maltz said. "This meant that we'd have a different role—one of more a mentor/advisor than a parent."

It isn't an easy transition for either party, Coburn acknowledges. Parents who are capable and caring and have spent much of their adult lives nurturing and encouraging their children must realize that their fledgling kids now need to fly on their own. It's time, Coburn says, "to support your child's growth rather than impede it."

That can be a leap of faith in your own parenting, she said. "Your kids know the values you have instilled in them and they will be taking those values with them to college." —Gerry Boyle '78

For more from Karen Levin Coburn go to www.lettinggobook.com

communicate with my dad a lot. I tell him what's going on here; he tells me what's happening at home—and he makes bad puns."

She believes that it's important for students and parents to stay in touch, especially early in the college years. "College students need support; parents are feeling a sense of loss. It's important to know what's going on in each other's lives."

Ellen Mohl found out what was going on in the life of her daughter (Lena Barouh '07) in an unexpected way. While skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho, her cell phone rang. "I was in a chairlift going up the mountain, and Lena called to say she felt sick and asked what she should do. I told her to go to the infirmary, and she did and learned it was just the flu. I laughed at the time, but it was all right. I was still a mom."

Dan and Paulette Kasperski discovered an interesting way to stay in touch with their son Steve Kasperski '05, at least on Saturday afternoons in the fall. "While others were probably a lot more successful in communicating with their son or daughter on a frequent basis than we were—boys don't communicate well—we did use the Internet on a regular basis to listen to Colby football game broadcasts, both at home and away," they wrote in an e-mail. "Because we live in Illinois, this helped us immensely in keeping track of Steve's activities (middle linebacker)



Micaela Pierce, 7, gives her sister Ashley Jones-Pierce '06 a last hug before heading home with their mom, Debra Pierce of Newton, Mass.

on a real-time basis every week and allowed us to share in his life at school."

Susan Malick speaks like the veteran that she is in playing the parent-of-a-college-student role. Son Nick Malick '05, her third and youngest child, just graduated from Colby. "We come from a small town in the San Francisco Bay area, so we wanted our three children to step out and broaden themselves. Our children don't want us to be underfoot."

As advice to parents just entering this transitional stage, Malick would tell them what she and her husband have tried to do: "Remember that this situation is intensely personal, varying from family to family and student to student. Try to take the cues from your child."

Nick Malick believes that the amount of contact with his parents over his four years at Colby has been just about right. "We usually get in touch about once a week, but it can be four or five times a week if I'm having a problem at school or they're having a problem at their end."

The younger Malick, like his mother, has advice for parents: "Try to hold off calling too much, especially the first year. Give your child some space. Let them try out who they are. If they're really having trouble, they'll get in touch with you." At the same time, Nick advises students to call parents sometimes just to connect, not just when they're in trouble.

Such connections can produce lifelong memories. Sue Leighton Smith, mother of Jennifer Leighton '05, recalls one such moment. "Our daughter called from the Coliseum in Rome to say that she was standing with her Colby friends, looking out over all that amazing history while the sun was setting. This was her first trip to Europe, and how exciting for those of us back in Connecticut to share that with her 'real time'."

So would anyone begrudge parent or student that shared experience? Hardly. Sometimes parents need to be there; sometimes they need to let go. Knowing which path to take and when, parents and educators say, requires wisdom, intuition, experience and, perhaps, even plain old luck. ▲