

Going Away to College **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Ever wonder why it's almost impossible to rent a truck in August or early September? Probably not, but just in case you are *now* contemplating the question—it's because all of us parents of college freshman have them. Yep, we've been planning ahead for the *big move* and have a corner on the rent-a-truck market, at least for the next month or so. I have mine—it's a 14-footer which will hold and haul my son's possessions to school. It's sort of a marker in his and my life—the kid is moving out and moving on, and so must my husband and I as he's the last one to go. But, we are not brand new at this fork in the road—my daughter left for college four years ago and we survived and my son actually did a stint at college earlier this summer as a sort of “warm up”. So, as an old pro in terms of getting kids ready and off to college as a mom, as well as a psychologist who counsels other parents on this topic, I offer the following advice, tips, and shoulder to cry upon.

Packing Up

Assuming you've all survived the summer in one piece the going off to college routine really has several distinct parts to it. First comes the difficult distinction between “what I want to take with me” vs. “what I have room for and what the college will allow in a dorm”. Usually the two are very different things. Kids want to take a lot—their computer, stereo/CD system, all of their clothes, music, pictures, yearbooks and the list goes on. Trust me; there is not enough room for all of that! Dormitories are usually tiny, cramped spaces and the kid generally has to share it with at least one other person. So forget the knickknacks and stick to the basics. Every college or university offers a list of necessary items to bring—just check their web site or call the Housing or Admissions offices for further information. You can always send items at a later date if it is really necessary. And, keep in mind that stuff gets stolen at school. I don't care if it is an Ivy League school or a tiny institution hidden in the Ozarks—if the item isn't tied down or locked up consider it at risk. Laptop computers should have the capability to be locked to the desk (yes, there is a locking device available just for that purpose) and credit cards, cash, digital cameras as well as other valuables should be kept in a *locked* file cabinet in the student's room. And, it should be kept locked, as well as the door to the room.

Life Skills and Life Lines

Okay, so you have the list of what will be brought to school and what stays home. Next, it's time to make sure that your child has been taught some basic life skills. This doesn't necessarily mean that he will use these skills, but at least you've explained the procedure and will feel a tad less guilt when he falls on his face!

Be sure that your child has done at least a load or two of laundry, including the moving the wet stuff to the dryer part of the process. Consider a discussion of darks vs. lights, and mention the concept of bleach for the white socks and underclothes, but don't expect too much interest. Hey, it's his stuff and if he wants to wear pink T-shirts that's his

problem! Most dorms have irons and ironing boards available in the office, so you may want to show the kid how to get out the wrinkles, but he probably won't be paying close attention. Consider purchasing a spray bottle on wrinkle releaser instead. For the really lazy and smelly kids, there's a product available designed to cover up odors (on couches, carpets, etc.) but college kids will spray it on their clothes rather than hit the dorm Laundromat. The Laundromat is also a prime place to get stuff stolen, and many kids are not willing to sit through a complete wash and dry cycle to make sure that their clothing is not taken. Most just bring the laundry home on visits anyway, hoping so that Mom or Dad will do it.

Will your child be driving to school and keeping a car on campus? Be sure to run through the *basics* of car maintenance (and be brief—the eye-rolling begins after the first few sentences). Show how to check the air pressure in the tires (especially if the vehicle is an SUV), the oil level, and the radiator/coolant fluid level. Point out the dial on the dash board, usually next to the fuel indicator, that shows whether the car is about to overheat and discuss what the child should do if that indicator moves toward the red zone. Review how to deal with a flat tire (Change it? Use a fix-a-flat product? Call AAA?)

Okay, next you need to discuss perhaps the hottest topic of all in terms of college prep: the budget. Rule #1—THE KID IS NOT ALLOWED TO SIGN UP FOR A CREDIT CARD. The charge account vultures will be lurking near favorite feeding holes on campus during the first few weeks, preying on unsuspecting freshman and offering free T-shirts, CDs and other “gifts” *just* to sign up for an account. Explain to your child that she doesn't need to begin to establish her credit history at this time, contrary to what the vultures will proclaim. There will be plenty of time later in life to do that. Teach her to live on cash and to use her checkbook. Also, explain how to balance a checkbook and how that must be done each month in order to avoid overdrawing on her account and racking up \$25 fees per bad check. Let her know that you are not going to foot the bill for bank fees that she could have avoided.

Set a budget, which is often easier said than done. Unless you've had an older child recently in residence at the same college by which to gauge expenses, you'll do a lot of guessing at first. A good place to start is to purchase the school's meal plan—at least the kid will be eating, nutritious food is offered (if not taken advantage of) and that part of the budget will be accounted for. This summer my son took a gander at the food offered, called it mystery meat, and chose to go it on his own. Big mistake—three and one-half weeks later and \$600 poorer, we figured out that fast food gets very expensive. The mystery meat has begun to look better to the kid and we're signing up for the meal plan in the fall. Also, consider payments needed for dormitory, tuition, books, fees, Blockbuster nights, shooting pool at the student union and pizza at midnight. Then, depending upon your child's responsibility level and nature decide whether she can handle being given the entire spending money for the semester at one time, or whether it should be deposited into her account on a monthly or weekly basis.

Finally, make sure that your kid has a telephone calling card to use (most dorms do not allow direct access to long distance calling) or a cell phone. If you purchase a cell phone check to see if it works correctly on the road to school as well as at the college—in the dorm room and on the walkways between classes. Decide whether it would be best for the cell phone’s “home area” to be based in your hometown, or whether it should be purchased at school, depending upon what would be more convenient for the student. Also discuss what you expect in terms of calls home per week, or whether email will be the primary communication device.

Getting to Stay at College

Huh? Why would a parent want to bring up the *possibility* of the kid having to move home, even before school has begun? Well, because it happens, and it happens too frequently. I believe that one of the main reasons for college failure is lack of focus on the child’s part. Kids need strict guidelines about what your expectations are, and without these being spelled out, disasters can occur. Sure, many college freshman are super-organized, focused and raring to hit the books. But just as many are immature, disorganized and ready to party. *Now*, not after a disastrous month or two, is the time to discuss your expectations with your child. I suggest that the following issues be covered:

- What grade point average needs to be maintained before Mom or Dad yank the kid home and put him in community college for two years until he matures a bit?
- What are your expectations about going to class and not lazing around the dorm room, sleeping in and hoping to catch the information from the roommate’s notes or via video classes?
- How about drinking or even drug usage? Underage drinking is an all-too-common and socially acceptable college practice, but underage drinking is illegal, stupid, and can quickly get out of hand. Most of my clients who fall into this pattern begin to skip classes, get behind in their studies and withdraw from courses.
- How many credits must the student *complete* in the semester? Lots of kids register for twelve or fifteen hours but drop to three or six by the end of the semester. The expectation of the minimum number of credits completed per semester is an issue that must be addressed and agreed upon by both the parents and the child *before* the semester begins so that there are no ambiguities. Statistically, more kids take four and one-half to five years to complete college now than the traditional four-year program—partly due to legitimate changes in their major area of study, but also due to too many wasted semesters when only three or six hours of course work were actually completed.
- What should the child do if he or she finds that they are in over their head—either academically (grade or credit problems), socially (too many friends or parties), or emotionally (homesick, not enough friends, lonely). The college counseling center is usually an excellent resource if the child doesn’t feel comfortable talking to Mom or Dad about these issues.

Tips for College Success

The June 11th, 2001 issue of *Newsweek* offered the following information about successful students. Share these with your student—it may be an eye-opener for both of you!

- Students who engage in extracurricular activities are the happiest students as well as the most successful in the classroom. They seem to find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives.
- The most successful kids found “mentor professors” to work with during their tenure at school—this activity led to letters for job recommendations or future references, which become exceedingly important later in life.
- 70 to 75% of the students in the study felt that they needed more guidance on courses to take, extracurricular activities, and advice from administrators than they were receiving. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the oil!
- Time management is key. Kids are generally horrible at it, and the study showed that who studying in a long uninterrupted block of time was much more effective than studying in short bursts.

Home for Visits!

Okay, so the kid packs up and moves to college, generally sticks to the budget, eats at least a few meals a day, and is making the grades. So far, so good. The next hurdle concerns the inevitable evolution of the parent-child relationship now that the child has “grown up”. Well, grown up in his mind, but perhaps not in yours. Remember, Junior will have been coming and going as he pleases by the time of his first visit home, and may balk at some of the old rules, curfews or restrictions. He probably thinks of himself as an adult, deserving of adult privileges. In a nutshell, he probably expects to come and go as he pleases at home just as he did at the dorm. Problem is that he’s had two to three months of “adult-like freedom” and eighteen-plus years of being your kid. The two often clash.

Some suggestions:

- *Be realistic about curfews.* To be fair, and to keep your sanity, you’re probably going to have to compromise. As long as he’s not breaking the law and is acting responsibly (not being in a car where someone is drinking alcohol or using drugs, or noisily waking up the neighborhood at 2:00 AM) you may want to consider letting him call the shots on curfew. See if it works, and if it’s within the realm of reasonable, go for it. If he’s disrupting the household or getting into trouble of course you’ll need to change the rules and lay down some stricter guidelines.
- *Be realistic about time spent with the family.* Face it; he’s not coming home just to see you. Trust me, I know. Former high school buddies are important to keep in touch with, and if they’re home he’ll want to be hanging around with them as well as visiting with the family. Suggest a compromise—how about dinners with the family and one evening on the weekend spent together, and the rest of the time

is his to spend with friends or just to lay around in a bedroom larger than a cracker box.

- *Mind your manners.* Although you may want to personally escort your child back to the dorm, or run up the street waving goodbye as he drives off to return to school, try to keep it together. If not for you, then for him. The kid doesn't need to feel guilty about leaving home—he needs to focus upon his classes and the future that lies ahead.

By following these guidelines, you and your child will be better prepared for a good college experience. This should be one of the most exciting, demanding, and stimulating times of his or her life. By avoiding problems such as poor grades, financial disasters, or emotional meltdowns the child will have a much greater chance of success in this new life chapter.