

Five Things Students Want Parents to Remember

As a university counselor, I have had the opportunity to listen to hundreds of students share their concerns. Over the years, I have compiled 5 themes that are very common among students in regards to their relationship with their parents during this developmental phase of their lives. As a result, I believe it is important to share with parents, the various points their students would like them to know.

- Dawn Keter, LCSW-C, CTM

“I can solve it on my own”

Problem solving skills and the ability to think through the consequences of our decisions are requirements for adulthood. It is natural for parents to want to rush in and save their children from all their dilemmas. However, when you solve their problems for them, it sends them an underlying message that they are not competent enough to figure it out for themselves and it deprives them of the opportunity to critically think and problem solve on their own. Over the next 4 to 6 years, the development of problem-solving skills is crucial to being successful in all areas of their lives. During their college career, your son or daughter will most likely call you to report they just failed their first calculus or chemistry exam of the semester. After learning this information, it is often a parent’s first response, to pick up the phone and call the instructor to find out how they can still pass the class. However, it is important to let them solve their problems. Whether it’s related to relationships, roommates, managing money, or academics, guide them through the process versus solving it for them. Ask questions such as “What do you think you should do? What would happen if you do that? How else could that be handled?” This way, they are doing the brain storming and you are teaching them how to problem solve on their own for the future.

“I want to decide for myself”

Now that they are overcoming challenges on their own, they are going to be excited about this new-found independence and will not be able to contain themselves from sharing with you, all of the outcomes of their wise decisions. When they call to tell you about the major they finally chose, the classes they registered for in the Spring, or their decision to break up with their significant other, refrain from stating your opinion. You will never agree with all their decisions and having to take the back burner to guiding them in the “right” direction will be quite difficult. However, they are calling you for a reason. They value you and they want your support and approval, not necessarily about the decisions they’ve made, but for their ability to make competent decisions on their own.

“Just listen”

There is no doubt that you will be contacted on a regular basis as part of a venting session. This is when your son or daughter calls and without coming up for air, talks for 10 minutes straight about how messy their roommate is, how their significant other is selfish and doesn’t care about their feelings, or about an instructor who just gave them a test which contained tons of material that was clearly never taught. As soon as they pause and you think there is an opportunity to respond, they inform you that they have to go now because they are meeting their roommate for lunch. And you’re left thinking “the same roommate who leaves their dirty clothes on your bed?” Parents usually have numerous thoughts and bits of advice they “need” to share with their son or daughter in an attempt to protect them. After all, you have been there and done that and you could easily save them a lot of time an effort if they would just follow your advice. It is hard to accept, but if they want your advice, they will ask for it. Most often, they just want you to listen. They need to know they can call you about anything, at any time, and have an unconditional place to dump all their thoughts and feelings. If you aren’t sure why they are telling you all this information, ASK! “Do you want my advice?” If they say yes, then they made the choice to hear your opinion and suggestions and it will prevent them from later stating that you are always trying to tell them what to do. They may really want to hear your take on things and if so, this gives them the

opportunity to let you know. In addition, if they want your advice but don't use it, it is okay. That goes back to them making their own decisions. But hearing your values and suggestions will stick with them even if they don't always agree with you. Finally, if they just wanted to vent, then you have given them a safe place to do that. Unless it involves their safety, just listen and don't use it against them later to prove a point. Be their sounding board. They will respect your support and will be calling you within 24 hours to tell you about the next overwhelming and frustrating experience.

“This is what I enjoy and it is important to me”

They are in the developmental stage of figuring out who they are and how they identify themselves. This process will enhance their self-confidence and make them a unique individual. They will hold onto most of the values they've been brought up with, but this will be the time they discover their true opinions, interests, and goals. It is a time when they are most likely choosing their career and developing lifelong habits. During their childhood, it is likely that you have exposed them to a wide variety of experiences that have nurtured their intelligence, spirituality, musical and athletic talents, etc. They have probably played soccer, T-ball, basketball, and lacrosse...performed in school plays, chorus concerts, and dance recitals... taken horseback riding, swimming, gymnastics, guitar, and piano lessons...in addition to spiritual and academic experiences. Now it is time to let them choose. Nurture their unique talents and interests. This will be crucial to their self-worth and their view of how they fit into the world. Let them be them. They may want to be a teacher even though you know they would excel in business. They may want to participate in theater versus activities that enhance their great musical talents. Whatever they choose to do, it is most important for them discover who they are and feel proud of themselves. Encourage them to pursue their interests, believe in them regardless of how unimportant photography may be to you. Again, their core values will stay in tack regardless of what their interests are and parents and caregivers are truly the most influential people in their lives.

“I love you and you have molded me into the person I am today”

Even though you may have spent the last two months before your son or daughter left for college (or quite possibly the last two years), arguing and debating about anything and everything, they love you and appreciate you more than ever. Their first experience with appreciating you may come when they finally realize that invisible robots do not magically do the laundry or that their roommate is more difficult to live with than their sister. However, within a short period of time they will take a step back and begin to grasp all the little (and big) contributions you have made to their lives. They may not have the capacity to fully understand until the birth of their first child, but you can be satisfied in knowing that someday, what goes around comes around. Until then, having some distance and separation from parents, siblings and even pets too, can have a great impact on their ability to reflect back at their upbringing. Once the daily battles of homework, curfew, and organizing necessities for sports practices have passed, they will develop a new-found appreciation for your never ending, tireless impact on their lives. A sense of entitlement will gradually transform into appreciation, GRADUALLY! This is the beginning to a new and exciting change in your relationship with them. You will no longer have to cook their meals, stay up until they get home, do their laundry, and argue about chores. There is no doubt that as exhausting as all of this has been, you will miss it and they will too. But enjoy this time as they will now be doing these things for themselves. This will lead to many negotiations over winter and summer break when they return home and explain to you (as though you did not know), that they have now been living on their own for the past several months and have managed to make it home each night even without a curfew or someone waiting up for them. It is at this point, that you can relish in your parenting and upbringing of them and take full credit for raising such a responsible and independent individual. It is equally important however, to make sure you acknowledge to them that you realize what a responsible and independent adult they have become.