

THE ROANOKE TIMES
SATURDAY, AUGUST 23, 2008

As they head to college, stay close by letting go

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Not too long ago, I stood in my driveway, waving and smiling with my best brave face, as the youngest of my three sons drove off to begin his final year in college. The lump in my throat cast aside any hope that this ritual would be less poignant this time than the three previous years. But as I watched him leave, I felt something even more profoundly than sadness: pride.

When he entered college, I could not have conceived of my son driving several hours -- by himself -- from our home to campus. I could not have imagined my son packing his clothes, his computer and his bike -- by himself -- while picking up the rest of his possessions in a self-storage facility near his school. I never dreamed he could even organize his dorm room without his mother's help.

Yet, he now happily and efficiently performs all those tasks. I know his upbringing helped make him the responsible young man he is today, yet I also know that his college years have given him maturity that he did not have before.

You and your child will never feel such mixed emotions -- sadness, pride, excitement, fright -- as when he or she goes off to college for the first time. I know all too well the worries: Will he and his roommate get along? Will she like the college? How can I leave him with people I know nothing about? But as both a parent and a university president, I have learned firsthand that moms, dads, sons and daughters will find few experiences that are more fulfilling.

What can parents do to help their child succeed while maintaining their own peace of mind? First and foremost: As hard as it is to do, you must stay involved but let go of your son or daughter. That does not mean you are giving them up completely, just allowing them to take control of everyday issues in their lives.

Do not make a mad dash to campus every time your daughter catches a cold or is struggling with a class. Encourage your children to try to resolve most issues themselves rather than trying to fix their problems; you will be surprised at how rewarding that can be as your child becomes a more responsible and resourceful problem solver.

Second, keep the lines of communication open. You do not need to call your children nightly, but assure them that you are there to listen whenever they need you. Setting up a regular time each week to talk is a great idea. (Trust me, when money is the issue, they are remarkably eager to stay in touch.)

Third, recognize that college is a time of exploration. Do not panic when your daughter suddenly announces she is changing her major from pre-med to philosophy, or your son comes home for Thanksgiving sporting a Mohawk. Trying out different majors, careers, friends and looks is part of the process of becoming an independent person. Your child will want to try out new ideas on you, and

college students need a trusting adult to listen and help guide them through the maze of options they face.

Indeed, if you are a first-year college student, you are entering a period of enormous transformation in your life. This is a time when you will have an unprecedented degree of freedom. Yet, with freedom comes responsibility.

You must now make the right choices in your life about virtually everything, from what you eat to when you need to study to how much you drink.

Second, no one is going to just give you an education. However, you have been given a marvelous opportunity to earn that education. Take advantage of the great minds and great facilities you have at your disposal.

Third, make the most of your first year in college by taking part in at least one extracurricular activity. Establish a real connection with people and activities outside the classroom and your residence hall by joining a club, performing volunteer work or playing intramural sports.

Parents, there is no doubt your relationship with your son or daughter will change when he or she becomes immersed in college life. Yet the different light in which you will see one another means that your relationship has grown, not shattered. Suddenly, that little boy or girl is an adult, complete with a level of honesty and maturity that will both amaze and gratify you.

Yes, that lump in your throat now will likely be back for an encore next year, the following year and the year after that. But, it may turn out to be a welcome reminder of how your child has flourished.