

## **How's It Going?**

### **Parenting Strategies – October 2009**

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As parents, we are usually both curious and concerned about who our kids are spending time with and what they are doing. Our desire to know and the opportunities to be worried are magnified when our children are away at college or are otherwise away from home. Most of us have asked our children “How’s it going?” to be met with the single-word reply of “good” or “okay.” This reply can mean any number of things, and we often find ourselves decoding what our child is expressing. Sometimes “good” really means good! Sometimes “good” is a cover for when things are really not so good, and it can also be a signal for “don’t bother me” or “none of your business.” Most of us aren’t in the habit or practice of sharing how we really are, though several times a day we likely encounter people who ask, “How are you?” From time-to-time, during the twists and turns of my life, I have thought of responding with, “How much time do you have, life is tough right now and I’d love to share how I am.” But we have been conditioned to answer the question in a perfunctory manner, though this pattern isn’t a habit within every culture or for every child or family.

### **So how do you tell how your child is doing when you are parenting from a distance?**

If you went away to college or spent significant time living away from home, you probably recall selectively sharing parts of your experience with your parents or other family members. You didn’t want to worry them, right? It is natural for your college student to assert and develop an expanded sense of autonomy during the college years, and one element that makes parenting from a distance particularly challenging is that we often lack an overall context for how our child is really doing. Your child might spend lots of time telling you about how much he or she dislikes a particular class during one conversation, only to go to class later in the week and find the course interesting. But you may never hear about the subsequent change in perception or experience. When parenting from a

distance, you will want to gain a greater sense of the context for your child's college experience and a lot can be garnered by simply listening.

**Is your child talking about:**

- classes that he or she is attending;
- grades that he or she has received;
- involvement in clubs or sports;
- academic projects or study groups with other students;
- participation in campus sponsored events and activities;
- going off-campus to shop or to visit local attractions;
- visiting the career, community service or study abroad offices;
- the resident advisor in their dormitory;
- teammates if involved in sports;
- an on or off-campus job (if they have one);
- the campus food;
- the fitness center;
- his or her friends.

If your child is naturally sharing stories and examples from the areas on the above list, then he or she is likely experiencing much of what you would hope during college. If you are not able to discern much of what is transpiring, then frame open-ended questions to help you build the context you seek:

- Tell me about one of your professors?
- What's your hardest course and why do you think that is?
- Who are emerging as your closest friends?
- What are you thinking about doing this summer or winter break?
- What are some of the projects you have due?
- When are you finding it the best time to study or to get work done?
- Where is one of your favorite places to go on campus?

Ideally you want to check-in without your child feeling checked-on. Never underestimate your parenting intuition. If your child has a day or two here and there where he or she seems a bit out-of-sorts or frustrated, that is likely normal development during the college years, but ultimately you know your child better than anyone else, so go with your gut. If your child is displaying warning signs of prolonged unhappiness or an inability to resolve stressors, then he or she most definitely needs prompt support and guidance from you and from college personnel. **Warning signs for significant struggles include, but are not limited to:**

- patterns of missing classes and assignments;
- low motivation;
- unhealthy weight changes;
- poor hygiene;
- complaints of not sleeping;
- consistent feelings of rejection or not fitting in;
- mood swings;
- isolation;
- apparent overreaction to what most would consider normal irritations;
- risky or self destructive behaviors.

While technology puts us in closer contact with our children from a distance than in any other generation, don't only rely on electronic communication to get a sense of how your child is doing. Talking by phone, preferably at a set time each week, will enable you to hear the emotions behind what your child is expressing. Periodically exchange pictures -- they are a good way to visually gain insight into what is going on in your child's campus life.

When our children are at college they will in all likelihood encounter or have the opportunity to participate in any number of activities from which we would want to protect them. Many of these situations and opportunities also existed before they headed to college, whether it is drinking, illegal or prescription drug use, sexual situations, etc., but in college the locus of control resides in their hands. Even

though the choices and decisions reside with our children at this point in their lives, it is imperative that we continue to parent them through these challenges.

**Consider focusing your parenting on:**

- sharing your values and how they evolved;
- engaging your child in dialogue about the range of consequences that exist for various decisions and behaviors;
- thinking together about strategies to get out of bad or awkward situations;
- sharing your concerns and reinforcing ways that you know your child can or has been responsible in prior situations;
- keeping a dialogue open (the eye-rolling ends much later);
- discussing bad situations they have observed and what happened to the people involved and how they think the people felt;
- talking about how there are usually a range of choices and thinking together about what those might be for anticipated situations;
- letting your son or daughter know (say this often to them) that you don't want them to protect you from hearing their problems, that your first goal will be to listen and you will resist the urge to solve;
- staying informed about college trends.

A student who experiences college in the range of ways that we hope they would, and who also has guidance around some of the most challenging issues that come with the greatest negative consequences, is more likely to tap into their growing ability to make responsible decisions, to self-monitor their behavior and to regulate their actions. When students engage in campus life in positive ways, they are often cognizant that they have more to lose if they make poor decisions.