

Saying Good-bye

Parenting Strategies – August 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Kay Kimball Gruder, SuccessfulCollegeParenting.com

Saying good-bye to your college-bound student often feels as awkward as a first date -- with anticipation intensifying as one wrestles with thoughts of what to say or not to say, deciding when and how to express feelings that seem important, and then often talking one's self in or out of the possibilities as the final moments draw near. The entire departure phase can also feel a bit interminable, especially if there isn't a defined time to depart and you find yourself wondering more than once "Should I leave now? Nope, guess not, the roommate's family just walked in."

There are many ways to say good-bye, but my question to you is, "**How do you want to say good-bye and what do you want to express?**" Many parents share that they are concerned that they will cry and they ask, "Is that okay?" Some parents freely express, almost as if they feel guilty about it, that they really can't wait for their child to go back to school, because their child's growing desire for independence created some parenting challenges during the summer months. Other parents find that the good-bye moments are just plain awkward, with people milling around, and their child obviously anxious for them to leave. Emotions typically run high, but there are some questions that you can ask yourself, and steps that you can take, to give shape to the remaining time and final moments that you have with your child.

STEP 1: As you think about saying good-bye to your son or daughter reflect on two components that exist – the emotional, saying good-bye from your heart – and the intellectual, saying good-bye from your head. Consider folding a piece of paper in half, labeling one half "Heart" and the other half "Head". Then begin to write down what you desire to express under the headings.

Don't worry if you have written down more under one of the headings than the other.

In looking at what you have written, it is probably apparent that you have a fair amount that you would like to express. So is it any wonder that when we leave all of this for the final day or moments with our child that we will feel unsettled and that our emotions vie to maneuver their way out?

STEP 2: Read through your reflections and see if you notice any patterns in what you desire to express. Saying good-bye often includes various content themes – some of the more common messages that parents share are about:

- staying safe;
- expressing one's love for one's son or daughter;
- doing well or being good;
- expectations for keeping in touch;
- reminding the child that he or she needs to do something important at a designated time or place;
- expressing confidence in their child's ability to succeed;
- not spending too much money;
- staying healthy;
- not worrying;
- missing their child.

STEP 3: Review what you have written down and begin to think about when it might be best received and heard by your child. I can pretty much guarantee that it isn't going to be when you are driving or flying together, setting up the dorm room, or attending orientation programs. As Shakespeare wrote, "Timing is everything!"

So not only do you have choices about what you express and when you express it, but you can also consider in what ways and by what mechanisms you want to share your sentiments and thoughts.

STEP 4: Think about different ways you can capture and express what you hope to convey to your child in saying good-bye.

Consider these ideas that other parents have used:

- create a departing ritual that has meaning for you and your child – consider incorporating an element of humor;
- give a memory book that focuses on your child's greatest strengths and abilities;
- have a celebration dinner well in advance of your child departing;
- write a letter or series of notes to your child that you give to him or her in advance and invite your child to open them as he or she wishes; (Maybe identify themes on the outside of each)
- ask your child what words of wisdom he or she anticipates you saying and then compare what he or she shares to what is on your mind;
- have family members and friends contribute to a list of "Must Do" in college and "Avoid Doing" in college and share this with your son or daughter;
- ask your child how he or she envisions saying good-bye;
- give a gift, perhaps funny in nature or particularly meaningful or useful.

The key is to express much of what you really desire to share way before your child leaves for college. Take your cues from your child once you are at the college -- this is his or her realm, even if only entering it for the first time.

Additionally, recognize that you will likely experience a range of emotions in the coming weeks and days – it is normal. Parents most often share that they feel:

- sad;
- agitated;
- relieved;
- happy to have extra time;

- concerned about how siblings are adjusting;
- unsettled.

Eventually the highs and lows will even out, especially if you consider integrating some of the following strategies during the days and weeks after your child goes to college:

CONNECT

- Seek opportunities to talk with other parents who have students in college;
- Access resources to supplement your knowledge about transitions and your student's development;

EXPRESS

- Acknowledge any feelings of loss with those around you (but not with your son or daughter);
- Consider writing about your emotions and feelings;
- Create opportunities for other family members to express their feelings (especially when there are siblings in the family);
- Talk with your child when you feel the best during the day or evening;

REFLECT & NURTURE

- Evaluate how you spend your time – perhaps you even have some new-found time;
- Do something that you enjoy -- that you haven't had a chance to do in recent months or years;
- Maintain your overall well-being;
- Think about viewing what you are feeling from an ENTIRELY different perspective

As we know from being parents, while there are many opportunities to say good-bye to our children there are also many opportunities to say "hello," and we would not experience the same joy in these reunions if we were never to depart from one another. So, as is attributed to Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), "Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened." May your parting be purposeful and eased by having taken the time to shape it.