

Problem Solving 101

Parenting Strategies –November 2010

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Now that the academic year is fully underway and the honeymoon of arriving at college is over, parents often become more aware of problems or challenges with which their student is dealing. You might find that your student doesn't share anything or maybe only snippets, but either way you find yourself experiencing that "I just know things aren't quite right" feeling. If you have a student who eagerly shares the whole picture consider yourself lucky, because it is difficult to be a good resource if everything doesn't quite add up.

Parents often ask me how they should respond when their son or daughter tells them that he or she is failing a class, or experiencing significant roommate issues, or falling behind in assignments, etc. The primary goal is to be a resource to your student without leaving an imprint, and to recognize that every time a problem emerges there exists an opportunity to guide your student toward what he or she needs to know, learn or do. The secondary goal is to guide your student in such a way that he or she is responsible for developing or recognizing the solution. This is a key element, because it is through ownership of the solution that the change in action or behavior is most likely to occur, and where your student can see himself or herself as a competent problem solver.

So let's say your student calls to say, "I think I am failing a class."

Right from the get-go you have choices about how you can respond. You can:

express your unhappiness through emotions, words and/or actions;

respond in a relatively neutral sort of way and ask a question that isn't emotionally loaded, maybe something like, "So you think you're failing a class, remind me which professor teaches that one?";

empathize or sympathize with your student by acknowledging his or her worry or share a relevant experience that you had and how that felt for you.

not react at all.

When your son or daughter shares a bit about a personal problem or challenge, he or she feels exposed and is vulnerable. It is during these initial moments that your son or daughter is testing the waters -- is testing you -- to see how you are going to react. Your student is sharing his or situation, not because he or she wants you to get angry or express your disappointment, but because he or she is looking to you to be steadfast -- a sounding board, and a guide in helping him or her to "make things right" or to "get back on track." In those same moments, your student is also deciding whether or not to share more or to abandon seeking your guidance. We don't usually give it much thought, but the first seconds that we interact are critical to the role that we can then play. If we respond by sharing our emotions in a judgmental way, or by using harsh words, and/or foreshadowing consequences, we have successfully shown our student that he or she should not come to us for guidance and that we only really want to interact when things are going well. If we don't react at all, then our student loses out on the opportunity to enhance problem solving skills, and he or she will be more likely to proceed by chance and not by self-design.

Parents will often ask, "So does it mean that I can never express my disappointment or anger over a situation?" And I respond, "We all know that our emotions can rule our brain, but at this point in your student's development he or she can benefit more from partnering with you to brainstorm options and solutions than riding out an emotional roller coaster with you."

When your student shares a challenge or problematic situation I encourage you to immediately ask yourself, "What skills and perspectives do I want my son or daughter to get out of this situation?" What parents tell me is that when they ask this question it often quiets their emotional reaction and gets them, and their student, focused on thinking together about the situation.

Consider integrating elements from this approach as you guide your student to solve his or her own problems:

Think together to identify the problem(s) in a concrete sort of way – there are often several problems that have contributed to a more significant situation;

Listen (simply listen) to what your student thinks has caused or contributed to the problem;

Partner in brainstorming the options for solving or changing the current situation – this is where it is particularly useful for you to know which services and resources exist at the college, because you can then prompt your student to explore them and determine which might be useful;

Encourage your student to find out from other students what they have heard works (or have done) in a similar situation – problems that students experience in college rarely only happen to one person -- often many others have gone through the exact situation and can lend good advice;

Talk together about multiple solutions and to think through "what if" scenarios – consider helping your student to think out loud about the pros and cons of each option;

Have your student choose the solution that he or she thinks will work the best – and have your student talk about possible back-up plans;

Plan a time to touch base to see how things are progressing.

It is important to remember (and for your son or daughter to realize too) that some situations cannot be entirely resolved, but your son or daughter can still gain skills and take steps and actions to rectify or remedy as much of a situation as possible. For example, a student who is failing a class might not be able to turn a failing grade into a higher grade if it is already late in the semester, but the student can learn what he or she can do next time to ensure that things don't head down the same path. **The student can learn how to:**

take initiative to speak with the professor;

access academic assistance resources;

meet deadlines to drop a class or to take a class pass/fail;

request an incomplete if there are extenuating circumstances;

ask for help early and often;

improve time management and study skills;

choose different classes;

connect with people on campus who are there to support student success.

It is also important to keep each situation in perspective, as most problems have taken days, weeks or months to evolve and it is rare that a single solution changes everything in an instant.

“Have you got a problem? Do what you can where you are with what you've got.”

-Theodore Roosevelt