

Embrace These Encouraging Words When Sending Your Child Off to College

In August of every year I see the posts and get the emails. Parents are dropping off their kids at college—and it's hard. I know it's hard.

One of our sons went to college in the city where we lived, so we got somewhat of a break with this one—although even moving them in a dorm room across town is hard.

I think it's the empty bed, which causes such a problem—you know, the one in the room you used to fuss about never being clean? And the empty spot at the dinner table. And the laughter. And, sometimes, the late night school project because they thought it wasn't due until next week.

There is a profound sense of loss. Word to parents of children at home: Enjoy those messy bedrooms while you can.

When our other son went away to school—nearly eight hours away—it was almost more than I could stand, or, so it felt like at the time. With both boys out of the house, I went through a minor depression stage. And I know the symptoms. It felt life would never be as good again. And, my wife and I had and have a great relationship together. We simply loved having our boys at home.

I have had a few years to process moving a child to college and I have some advice to share. Please know I'm being sensitive. About every year I get a frantic email from a parent. Everyone responds differently, but it hits some people so hard they are near panic.

These are particularly helpful for the time of dropping off

your child at college and the few months that follow—those appear to be the hardest.

Here are some quick words of encouragement about leaving your child at college:

1. Don't overstay your welcome. When the time comes to leave, leave on a high note. This may be the most important advice I can give and the one I didn't do right. You want to see them having fun if possible.

Nate was mature enough to know it would be hard, so we decided to make it a father/son adventure to drop him off at school. He had a couple good days of orientation where they wanted one parent there. Nate seemed to be making friends. He had a great group of guys in his dorm. I was excited for him.

Then I made one fatal mistake. Learn from me, parents. I spent another night and said we would have breakfast together before I left in the morning. Wow! We sat in a breakfast place for two hours and never said a word. He is a youth pastor now across the country from us, so I don't think he would mind me telling you the truth now. When it was time for me to leave, he lost it. I had to pull myself away and knew he was miserable as I left.

Had I left when he was busy, involved, and surrounded by friends it might have been easier. I certainly think it would have been.

2. Let them have their space. It's their new journey. This may include letting them decorate their room as they want to decorate it or looking for hints when they want to make the decision on their own. Now isn't the time to baby them. They are entering a very adult, independent phase when they get to college. Treat them with this respect.

Of course, we know they have much maturing to do. They still need your wisdom and, hopefully, will want it. But you are

more likely to get asked for it if you do not force it upon them.

3. Let them help determine the level of communication. Obviously you cannot wait to hear from them. But, be careful. This isn't elementary school—or middle or high school. Remember how with each progression you knew less and had to figure out more on your own? Well, this is college. Don't keep texting them looking for updates. Don't guilt them into calling. As hard as it is, the more pressure you use the less they may be motivated to tell you.

This said, I think it is fine to send them encouraging cards and emails. Don't overdo this either, but they will especially enjoy getting mail—the snail kind. You could even use this time to affirm them and let them know how you are praying for them. This is good advice for grandparents too. And, occasionally include some of their favorite snacks in a care package.

4. They probably will do better than you think they will. You need this reminder, don't you? Because, right now you're concerned for them. Will they know what to do if something bad happens? Will they take care of themselves physically? Will they eat right? Well, I can almost assure you they won't do everything right. Do any of us? Even still? But, at least in my experience, children often seem to perform better when we aren't around. Hasn't it been this way much of their life? You loved how other parents bragged on them for their behavior at their house. Even in this sometimes careless days of college they will not forget what you taught them.

5. There will be a period of adjustment. Adjustment will come for you and for your children. It is harder for some parents and some children than others. Seek encouragement from other parents who have done this one and survived (which most of us do). Church is a great blessing for this.

It's okay to cry, but try not to as much on drop-off weekend. (I knew I needed to be strong for my son, so I waited until I got to my vehicle; then I cried all the way home.) Be prepared to encourage your children during this transition season. They will need you more than they know how to ask for your help. They have their own emotional sense of loss. They may try to be strong, but the first semester may be difficult. Remember, they've never done this either!

6. They will come home again. You feel a sense of loss, but you've not lost them. They will be home. It will be different, but it will be great. You will enjoy these times and make new memories. And, trust me on this one, as much as you'll love them being home—anytime—in time you may even be glad it's time to go back to school again.

If only we could put a lid on time. If only we could slow down the speed of our children's life. We can't. It keeps moving forward. Enjoy this new season of their life—and yours—like you have (hopefully) every other season.

7. If you're having to do this, it means you did something right. You've done your job well. Most of us want them to mature, grow up, move out and settle on their own. Remember, you raised them for this moment. And many others they will experience.

Celebrate parenting done well. You are sending them out with more foundational wisdom than you think you are. Let your godly pride for them replace some of the emptiness you feel inside.

If the day has come to send them to college—do it with joy! Embrace the moment. These are good times too. Seriously.

Praying for you.

Experienced parents, is there any other advice you've learned?

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