

## CUTTING THE CORD 101: DEALING WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

### HANGING ON LETTING GO

Let your college children go--and feel good about it

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Published October 16, 2005

My firstborn started college this fall nearly 1,000 miles from home. After responding to yet another query about how I'm adjusting to her absence, I realized that the mythology doesn't fit my reality.

To these furrowed brows of concern and sad tales of empty-nest syndrome, I find myself saying, "I'm fine. Thanks." You can imagine the puzzled looks that follow. So here's the skinny: Of course I love and miss my daughter, but the realities of modern life mean we are in almost daily touch by e-mail, instant message or phone. Her homesickness after a week surprised and concerned me, but she has now adjusted nicely.

Despite the expectation of many friends and acquaintances that I must be miserable, I'm not. This move seems so right and good for my daughter. One friend said it best when she acknowledged the delight in enjoying, from afar and somewhat vicariously, your child's pleasure in the adventure of college.

Part of parental well-being comes from the ability to let go. It's really about how fulfilled you are by your child's growing independence and your role in encouraging that.

Mind you, I have the normal parental doubts and fears. One erupted when I sent my daughter to Jewel to fetch ingredients for the gazpacho she requested for her farewell home-cooked meal. She returned with the wrong parsley. It was clear that she couldn't depart for college the next day without knowing the difference between curly and Italian parsley--amazing in this house of serious foodies. But my daughter corrected me. Because her sustenance would come from dormitory food service, she noted, parsley differentiation was not a requirement.

My fears emerged again when I drove to college. Wondering whether I missed many opportunities to help guide her in the world, I asked her what I'd failed to teach her. "Nothing," she replied, to my relief. But that lasted a mere two hours until she said there was one thing. "When you wash whites, you use hot, right?" she asked. I confirmed the white-into-hot approach and wondered, again, how 14 years of helping with the laundry could have led to such ignorance.

Anecdotes aside, arrival day at college was marked by an impressive display of values. Her school's president hit all the right notes, stressing hard work, supplemented by good

play, and emphasizing that incoming freshmen were expected to practice the institution's principles of giving back to the world we inhabit. It was a grand start, reiterating the very principles we'd worked so hard to instill at home. Who wouldn't want to leave their child in such hands?

When the president told incoming freshmen to call home regularly, parents applauded. Then he told them not to call too often, adding, "Once a day is enough." We all laughed.

No doubt the college experience has been altered by this age of constant connection. It's not the same as when my husband's parents dropped him off many years ago: They had only the occasional long-distance phone call. So maybe the message, whether conveyed online or by cell phone, is that it's easier to break free from the empty-nest mythology. That knowledge can free a parent to experience the joy and pride at watching one's progeny grab life by the horns and climb on for the best ride possible.

Right now, that makes me a happy witness to my daughter's college experience. But ask me again in two years, when my youngest heads for college.

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