

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP COLLEGE STUDENTS VALUE THEIR MISTAKES

No one likes to make mistakes. We know we may not be perfect, but we try not to make too many mistakes – especially what we might consider “stupid mistakes”. College students don’t like to make mistakes either, but they will probably make some – perhaps many – mistakes throughout their college career. It is difficult, as a parent, to watch your college student make what you might consider avoidable mistakes. The problem may not be the mistakes themselves, but the attitude that both parents and students have toward their mistakes.

Making mistakes is a way of learning. We may make mistakes when we try new things, or stretch our limits. Others may have made the same mistake before us, but we may need to make the mistake ourselves in order to learn from it. It doesn’t matter what others have told us, we need to have the experience ourselves. College is, in many ways, practice for life. College students may stumble and fall at times – sometimes in small ways and sometimes in more serious ways – but, hopefully, they will learn from their mistakes and become wiser. As college parents, we can help our students make sense of these experiences.

This article is not about specific mistakes that students make in college, but rather it is about how parents can help college students accept their mistakes as a valuable part of their college experience and learn from them. Sometimes the mistakes that students make in college may be very serious, and have serious consequences. It is important that parents consider carefully when to intervene. (Hint: it may not be as soon as we think.) Parents need to continue to find the balance between letting go and allowing their student to make a mistake and bear the consequences, and intervening when the student’s health or safety may be at stake.

Barring a serious issue of health or safety, one of the most difficult things that college parents need to do is step back and allow their student to make some mistakes. It is from these mistakes that students will, hopefully, learn, adapt and go on. Although we want to protect them from mistakes, the process of learning from mistakes is a transforming life skill which will help them establish an attitude for life. Students who are afraid of making mistakes, or who have been protected from ever making (sometimes serious) mistakes, may not learn how to make decisions because they become paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. Students who are afraid of making mistakes may be reluctant to try new things – one of the key experiences in college.

You understand the importance and value of making mistakes in college, in a relatively protected environment, but you may wonder how you can help your student find value in the mistakes he may have made? Here are a few things that you can do as a parent to help.

- **Don’t jump in to rescue your student.** Let him make the mistake – even though you may see it coming. Remember that this can be a positive experience.
- **Help your student evaluate the experience.** Making a mistake can be helpful if it means that your next decision will be different. What has he learned from this experience? What will he do differently next time?
- **Help your student remember that learning is a process** of constantly making and correcting mistakes, and that she has done it all of her life. How did she learn to walk, to ride a bike, to add 2+2?
- **Avoid dwelling on the mistake**, and help your student avoid dwelling on the mistake. View this as a new start with a new understanding and move forward.
- **Help your student understand that one key to learning from being wrong is admitting that you are wrong.** Help him bear the consequences of his choices and decisions. Help him take responsibility for his actions. Don’t allow him to blame the college, the instructor, friends, roommates, the situation.
- **Try to find some successes in the experience.** What did she do right? Did she handle the situation well? Did she show integrity and honesty in admitting to the mistake? Look at the positives.
- **Help your student try to determine what caused the mistake.** Was it caused by a lack of knowledge? Poor judgment? Carelessness? Learning the cause may help prevent another, similar mistake.

- **Help your student put this situation in perspective.** Is it a large, serious mistake, or something easily rectified? It may not be as serious as it seems.
- **Help your student use this as an opportunity to reevaluate his actions and his choices.** In the long run, the problem will not be the mistake itself, but not learning from the mistake and evolving.

As college parents, it is important that we recognize that our students will make mistakes. It is difficult to watch, but it is through many of these mistakes that our college students will grow and mature. We can help our students keep these experiences in perspective and see mistakes as an opportunity rather than a failure. Our students will look to us for cues about our attitude toward mistakes.

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TEN PARENTAL HABITS THAT CAN NEGATIVELY AFFECT YOUR COLLEGE STUDENT

As college parents we want the best for our college students. Many college parents have spent years planning for and working toward their student's college experience. They would never intentionally do anything to harm their student's chances of making the most of his years in college. However, there are some things that parents do, often unintentionally, that may have negative effects for their student.

Check this list below and consider whether or not you may be guilty of any of these habits. Certainly, no parents are guilty of all of these habits. Many parents may not be guilty of any of these habits. Unfortunately, all are actions that some parents take at one time or another. The list may seem harsh, but it gives us all pause, and food for thought.

- ***You have too much contact with your college student.*** Many parents may have a hard time believing that there can be too much contact. You are concerned about your student. You want to know that your student is doing well. You want to know that your student is happy. You miss your student. You want to fill your student in on life at home. And so you call or text your student several times each day. Your student calls you to discuss all of her decisions. You like continuing to be involved in your student's life. However, a major part of the college years is the increasing independence that the student experiences. Sometimes holding on too tightly may hinder that growing confidence and independence.
- ***You don't let your student make his own mistakes.*** Sometimes, as parents, you can see the mistake coming. You know a poor decision at the moment that it is made, or being considered. You see your student heading down a dangerous path. Certainly, you should help your student avoid serious mistakes that can have dire consequences – especially if they involve health or safety. But many mistakes, although they might be avoided, are important life lessons. Students need to learn to take responsibility for themselves, and that often involves bearing the consequences of their actions. Letting students make their own mistakes, and learn from them, is an important part of these college years.
- ***You encourage your student to come home often during the semester.*** If your student's college is close enough to make it feasible, it may seem like a good idea to encourage her to come home on weekends. Perhaps your student would like to keep a job at home. You want to make sure she is sleeping and eating well. You may feel that she should maintain contact with friends at home. You may feel that she can study better, or avoid partying temptations, at home. But students who come home often for weekends are less engaged in their college experience. They have less time to make new friends and get involved in campus activities. Students who are less engaged in their college experience are at greater risk for leaving school and also often receive poorer grades.
- ***You burden your student with problems at home.*** You certainly want to help your student stay in contact with home life, and you need to be honest with him about major issues happening at home. But be careful that you don't overburden your student with issues about which he can do nothing. Remember that your student is trying to adjust to being away. This will be more difficult if he feels guilty about not being at home.
- ***You "help" your student by taking care of school issues for him.*** Perhaps you know that a deadline is approaching and your student hasn't dealt with something. You know that your student should make a deposit or turn in a form or write a letter. A reminder to your student may be helpful, but doing it for your student may not. Or perhaps, you know that your student has difficulty getting up in the morning so you call him each day. Although you may be helping your student in the short term, you are not helping him to gain the independence that will serve him well in the future.
- ***You pay bills late, file forms late or miss an important parental deadline.*** When bills are paid late students often have "holds" placed on their accounts. This may prevent your student from registering for classes or choosing a dorm room. This difficulty is compounded if your student doesn't know that a bill is unpaid or a form unfiled. She may be frustrated when she doesn't understand why she can't do what she needs to do.

- ***You are not completely honest on your financial aid forms.*** When you complete the FAFSA or the Profile or any other scholarship information, double check that your information is entirely accurate. If there is a discrepancy, your student could lose his financial aid or scholarships.
- ***You try to act as your student's academic advisor*** – telling her what classes to take or how many credits she should carry. You may have ideas about courses, and you should certainly discuss your student's schedule with her, but let the professionals at the college do what they are trained to do. They may know more about certain classes or sequences of courses. They have seen students with too many credits who are unable to do quality work. They have seen the students with too few credits lose focus or need an extra year to complete college. Weigh in, but remind your student that she needs to work with her advisor to plan her course of study.
- ***You "heavily edit" your student's paper, or write your student's paper, or write a letter or e-mail in your student's name.*** Consider carefully the message that any of these actions send to your student. Consider carefully whether these will help your student in the long run. Yes, he may receive a better grade on a paper or in a class, but what is the lesson that he has learned?
- ***You forget that you and the college have the same goal: your student's success.*** If you do need to contact the college – through phone, e-mail, or in person, try to be patient and understanding if you don't get an immediate answer to your question – or you don't get the answer that you had hoped for. Sometimes the person to whom you talk may not be the person with the answer. Remember, too, to be completely honest in any information that you give to the college. Don't harm your student by trying to make excuses for him or giving inaccurate information. The college can't help if they don't know the reality of the situation.

Even the best intentioned parent may make an occasional mistake that may affect his student. We all do the best that we can. Taking a few minutes to think about the bigger picture or possible consequences of some of our actions can help us avoid what might be some costly mistakes for our students.

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AFFIRMING “HELICOPTER PARENTS”: HOW TO HOVER CONSTRUCTIVELY

The concept is certainly not new, but it warrants continual examination – and sometimes redefinition. In this article, we consider the consequences of helicoptering and suggest some possible ways in which parents might hover productively.

Helicopter parents, (those parents who hover closely over their children, ready to swoop in at a moment's notice to rescue the student or attack the enemy) have caused colleges to express concern about parental involvement in college students' lives. Many colleges clearly send messages to parents to “back off” or “stay away”. In most instances, it doesn't work. Parents continue to be closely involved in their students' lives because they feel that they are needed to help the student be successful. Many parents may not fully understand the consequences of excessive involvement or hovering.

What are the negative consequences of hovering too closely?

- Parents who intervene constantly in their student's college life and experiences may hinder student's development and growing self-advocacy and independence. One of the goals of the college experience is to allow the student to become an independent adult. When parents jump in too quickly or too often, the student does not have the opportunity to develop his independence.
- Parents who continually check up on their student and who jump in quickly may be sending the student the message that they do not trust her and do not think that she is capable of making decisions or handling her problems.
- Parents who are quick to the rescue are not allowing their student to experience some failures in the relatively safe environment of college. Students learn through their experiences (including the consequences of their actions) and from occasional failures. (Babies fall as they learn to walk, children fall off bikes as they learn to ride, adults lob tennis balls over the fence before they learn to ace the serve.) College is, in some important ways, practice for life. Students who do not have the opportunity to practice making mistakes may make their mistakes later when the stakes are higher.
- Parents who rescue their student throughout his college experience are not helping to prepare him for the “real” world of work following college. Human Resource offices and work supervisors will not be responsive to helicopter parents.
- Parents who hover too closely over their college child are not allowing themselves to move on and to let go. The college years mark a transition for parents as well as for students and some parents may need to work to redefine their role during this time. It is not a lesser role, it is a different role.

Is it possible to hover, or be a helicopter parent, in a positive way?

We believe that the answer to this question is a resounding yes! It is the foundation of the philosophy of College Parent Central. We believe that parents who are perceptive and knowledgeable can and should be involved in their college students' lives in a positive way.

- Recognize that college marks a transition both for your college student and for you. Examine your motivations for your involvement in your student's life and take action to help yourself make the transition to a new role in parenting.
- Re-evaluate your foundational goals for your college student. If your goal is for your student to have the opportunity to grow in all aspects of her life, and to gain experience in self-advocacy and independence to

prepare her for her life after college, then limiting your involvement will help her attain that long-term goal. Focusing on the long-term rather than short-term goals will help.

- Arm yourself with knowledge. Many parents hover because they do not understand what their student is doing or why the college has certain expectations or institutes certain policies. The more that you, as a college parent, understand about the college experience, the more comfortable you will be with your child's experiences.
- Find the appropriate level of involvement. This may take some trial and error, but continually evaluating and assessing your actions will help you determine whether you have overstepped or overdistanced.
- Recognize that the college years are a progression. As your student progresses throughout his college experiences he should need you less and less. Recognize that your college junior or senior has come a long way since his freshman year.
- Do more listening than talking. Definitely be there for your student as she turns to you for solace, support or advice, but listen and encourage without acting.
- Whenever possible, keep your communication and involvement with your student rather than with the college directly. You may need to guide and encourage your student in her interactions with the college, but she should take action rather than you.
- Recognize that concern and caring do not require action and micromanagement. When you listen, or offer support, or reassure, or chide or scold, you are actively involved and not passively standing by.
- Be proud of your student and how far she has come so far and will go. Let her know often that you recognize and value what she is doing and how much she is growing. Let her know that you are there (hovering?) in order to appreciate and support what she is doing. This is definitely productive hovering.

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AFFIRMING “HELICOPTER PARENTS”: A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

The concept is certainly not new, but it warrants continual examination – and sometimes redefinition. In this article, we will examine some views on who helicopter parents are and how they operate.

Who are today's helicopter parents?

Today's helicopter parents are the baby boomers who have programmed and protected their children since they were born. They are parents who have been involved in every aspect of their children's activities. Like parents of all generations, they want the best for their children, but they believe that achieving that best requires direct parental involvement.

There are more than a few helicopter parents. According to a recent National Survey of Student Engagement, which surveyed approximately 10,000 students at 24 colleges in the United States, forty percent of freshmen say a parent has intervened to solve a problem for them. The majority of these students are not unhappy to have their parents involved.

A study conducted by the University of Texas/Austin has found that the phenomenon of helicopter parenting crosses racial, ethnic and socioeconomic status. Parents of all kinds, at all levels, engage in hovering of some kind. The same study found that approximately 60% of the hovering in their sample was done by mothers on behalf of their sons. Fathers seemed to “hover” more in the area of grades and finances and were more likely to call top administrators at the college.

Is helicoptering or hovering all bad?

This is the key question. Many colleges and universities (as well as much of public opinion) would suggest that helicopter parents are all bad and they simply need to move out of the picture and leave their college students alone. James Boyle, past president of College Parents of America, has suggested that one problem may be the stereotype itself. He states that the “stereotype has been harmful. It created an image that doesn't lend itself to a dialogue.” Colleges may find it difficult to engage with parents whom they view as in “attack” mode.

We would suggest that parents need to examine carefully *why* they hover and *how* they hover and ensure that their hovering is productive and helpful. It is possible to hover effectively, but in many instances this may involve stepping back and reassessing. Both parents and college officials seek the same goal – the long-term success of the student.

The National Survey of Student Engagement mentioned earlier also suggests that students of very involved parents seem to exhibit higher levels of engagement and more “deep learning activities” such as after class discussions and independent research, and these students may be more satisfied with their experiences. However, these students do not necessarily earn higher grades. One speculation was that these parents may actually be more involved because their students are struggling. It is important not to jump to cause-and-effect conclusions, but it is important that parents recognize that their involvement may have consequences.

What type of helicopter are you?

There are all forms of helicopters, and they are used for many purposes. Helicopter parents are most often referred to as “stealth helicopters” or “Black Hawk helicopters” or “attack helicopters”. These are negative terms, for sure, and it is parents who qualify as these types of helicopter who have earned their negative reputation. These are the parents who hover waiting to jump in and intervene on their child's behalf. Their interference may do just that – interfere with their student's independence and growth.

Other helicopters, however, may be less ominous. Helicopters are also used to monitor traffic. Traffic helicopters are seldom involved other than observing – and perhaps giving a warning when a different route may be warranted.

(Motorists, of course, may or may not heed these warnings.) Helicopters are used in searches to locate lost children or hikers when they need to be rescued. (These helicopters may not actually do the rescuing once the person is located. The actual rescue operation is carried out by others.) Helicopters are used in emergencies to rescue injured victims. (Air transport is usually a last resort – only when other means of transport won't suffice.) Helicopters may be used to dump water necessary to put out fires. (Again, these are used only on very large or dangerous fires that can't be managed any other way.)

Parents can hover productively, but it requires that parents examine carefully their own motivations, their student's true abilities, their goals for their student, and their approaches. It is difficult work and often requires that parents rethink their first instincts (which are often to jump in and rescue immediately). Rather than pretend not to be helicopter parents, parents might do well to redefine what the term helicopter parenting means.

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AFFIRMING “HELICOPTER PARENTS”: REDEFINING THE TITLE

The concept of “Helicopter parents” is certainly not new, but it warrants continual examination – and sometimes redefinition. In this article, we look at the definition of helicopter parents, as well as some of the motivation behind parental hovering.

Helicopter parents have a poor reputation. Actually, that is probably a polite way of putting it. In most of the higher education world, when the term “helicopter parents” is used, it is not used kindly. Even parents who engage in “helicoptering” don’t like to identify themselves as such, “I don’t want to be a helicopter parent, but . . .” “The truth is that many parents *do* hover, but some do it better than others. The concept itself isn’t necessarily bad, but the extremists have given it a bad name. Perhaps what needs to happen is that more parents need to redefine what it means to be a helicopter parent and learn to do their hovering productively.

What do most people mean when they refer to helicopter parents?

The term “helicopter parents” is usually used to refer to parents who are too involved in their child’s life. The term is not limited to college parents; some parents begin helicoptering early in their child’s life. This helicoptering, or hovering, is often detrimental to the growth and maturity of the child. In many cases the title is apt, the behavior is accurate, and the detrimental effect is real. Parents are probably not helping their child when they hover too closely.

At the college level, helicopter parents more specifically micromanage their student’s life, virtually walk through the day with their student (via cell phone, texting, Twitter, or Facebook), jump in and rescue their child and make decisions for their child. They call the student daily, or multiple times each day (perhaps to wake the student up in the morning), contact professors for the student, choose courses, edit papers (or write papers?!) intervene in roommate issues, deal with computer problems and faculty conflicts, and call school administrators to advocate or intervene.

Is it any wonder that colleges are sending parents the message that they need to “back off”?

Why have college parents adopted the helicopter approach?

Parents may hover over their children for any number of reasons. However, one statement is true of *all* helicoptering or hovering parents – they want the best for their child. Parents want to do everything that they can to ensure that their student has a successful college experience. It is natural to want to protect and advocate for your child. The goal is the same for all parents, although the motivations may be different. Many parents may not even recognize their own motivation.

- Parents have been sent messages all through their child’s life that students of involved parents do better in school. Study after study has suggested that when parents are involved in their student’s experiences in elementary, middle and high school, that the students do better academically and are more likely to attend college. Suddenly, when students enter college, the message changes, but parents’ habits may not change.
- Some parents feel they need to protect their child from the dangerous and harsh world. This generation has been the most protected in history. Today’s students are the children who grew up with car seats, child safety locks, seat belts, bike helmets. They were driven or escorted to activities and friends’ homes and seldom walked the streets alone – day or night.
- Some parents continue to be involved because they have always been involved in planning and programming their child’s life. They have scheduled day care, play dates, dance lessons, sports camps, scout meetings, after school activities, day camps, swimming lessons, riding lessons, and youth activities. Parents have spent countless hours carpooling their child to all of these activities.
- Some parents may be overinvolved in their student’s college life because they are overreacting to their own parents’ hands-off approach. A generation ago, most parents had little to do with their student’s college

experience. Other than move-in day, Parents' Weekend, and graduation, parents left most of what happened to students at college to the students.

- Some parents may be overinvolved in their students' lives simply because technology allows them to do so. With the advent of cell phones, texting, social media, video conferencing, instant messaging, Facebook, and tweeting, it is possible for parents and students to be in almost constant contact. Parents may feel that they need to take advantage of all possible avenues of communication simply because they are available.
- Some parents may be overinvolved because they feel that they need to protect their investment. The costs of college are monumental, and parents may feel that they need to be sure that they "get their money's worth" by directing their student's experiences.
- Some parents are overinvolved because they don't trust that their student can succeed without their intervention.
- Some parents hover simply because they do not understand what is happening in their child's college world. They hover in order to gain information.
- Some parents may be overinvolved because they equate hovering with concern. If they are concerned about their student, they feel that they need to be doing something about their concerns.
- Some parents hover for themselves. They may know on some level that their child will be fine, but they need the involvement for themselves – they are not able to let go.

All of the reasons that parents hover are legitimate, all grow from a genuine desire to help their student, and all require a new vision of the parental role in the college experience. It is helpful, as a parent, if you examine your own motivations for being involved as well as your own level of involvement to discover where you fit on the helicoptering spectrum.

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Letting Go of College Kids

What seems like an adventure for your child is often a loss for parents

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Letting Go of College Kids

The college acceptances are arriving. Kids are elated and [parents](#) are panicked. Your son cries, “I got in!” You smile and your heart sinks at the same time. “Is he ready?” “Am I ready?” To answer these important questions, I consulted with my very [wise](#) colleague, Dr. Roy Bullock. Roy has been giving the Letting Go Lecture to parents at college orientation for the last 20 years. Here are some things he told me.

First, pat yourself on the back for getting them this far. If they have been accepted to college, you have already been successful. When they were born, they were defenseless. They couldn’t feed themselves and would have died without you. They were completely dependent on you. But, they are no longer dependent children. If your child can get around in the world without you, then you have succeeded. Every parent’s goal is to make themselves obsolete.

As a parent, you have invested nearly two decades of your time, money and love in this young person. It is natural to wonder if they’ll be OK, if they’ll make it in the world. Remember, you have taught them all you can, even though they still have a lot to learn. And, you deserve some credit. Pat yourself on the back.

To me, I think of young adults as baby foals with wobbly legs. They are just learning to walk and they will fall down. They even have a right to fall down. Only by falling down and picking themselves up, can they learn. I remember holding my precious infant in my arms and wishing that I could magically implant in him all the mistakes I had made so that he could avoid them. If he was a second generation airplane, I could improve on the design. But, he is not and each new generation has to reinvent themselves. They have a right to make their own mistakes. As Roy says, “Life is a stern teacher. You get the test first and the lesson later.”

Going off to college is a rite of passage. According to Joseph Campbell, mythology and rite supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward (Campbell, 1949). Every college student is a hero. “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is presented by separation-initiation- return.” The hero leaves the familiar (separation), ventures into the unknown (initiation), and returns victorious (return). This myth crosses culture and time. Just as Moses left his people, climbed Mt. Sinai, received the Ten Commandments, and returned to his people; your child will leave home and community, seek danger and adventure, and return an adult. It is the hero myth. It is initiation into adulthood.

If our child is on a hero journey, so are we. But ours is slightly different. While they are being initiated into society, we are being freed. Campbell compares the lifespan to loading the camel. During the first half of life, we load the camel. We pile on the baggage of society: rules, expectations, obligations. But during the second half of our lives, we unload the camel and

society's baggage. We unload ourselves of society's rules and obligations. We lighten our loads. Our children are piling on the baggage and we are taking it off. We are getting lighter.

Your child is making a transition from [adolescence](#) to adulthood. And, it is a bumpy road to adulthood but college is a relatively safe place to grow up. Your child no longer needs you as truant officer or CEO of their life. They need you as a friend. If you are fortunate, after college they will return as your friend. I am reminded of that quote attributed to Mark Twain, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant, I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

If your child is making a transition, so are you. You will be a parent your whole life but your role changes. You change from a benevolent despot to a friend. The despot makes the rules and enforces them. The friend listens. The friend is available for consultation and support. Don't give unsolicited advice, Roy says. Let your son or daughter seek you out. If you intervene too much in their lives, they will resent you and avoid you. Your child is changing and so are you.

Turn your energy to yourself. Have fun. Remember all those things you always wanted to do but didn't have time for? Now you have time for neglected hobbies, old friends, and new adventures. Now, it's your turn. You've paid the price of parenthood, you did your best, and now you are free. You owe it to your kids to stay alive- healthy and vital.

Letting go is the most benevolent thing you can do. And, it is not easy. It takes [self-discipline](#). Roy told me about a cartoon he remembered. There was a young man dressed in a cap and gown at graduation. He was staring down at the world from outer space. He said to the world, "I have my A.B." And the world replied, "Stay with me and I'll teach the rest of the alphabet." The point is: they still have a lot to learn. But, you have taught them as much as you can. Let them go.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: MJF Books.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-teenage-mind/201308/letting-go-college-kids>