

# Guide for Families Transitioning to College

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## What are the transitional issues?

When a young adult leaves for college, separation is the primary developmental issue facing both the student and family. This task is a process, not an event. Separation does not mean saying “Goodbye, good luck and call if you need me.” For the student, it means moving towards independence, developing new skills, making mistakes, taking increased responsibility for one’s life, and developing a more adult, mature relationship with family members. The family’s role is to give their young adult the room to search academically, personally and professionally.

This time of transition is about your young adult having the freedom to make decisions, taking responsibility for those decisions and dealing with the curve balls that may result from those decisions. Some specific issues include:

- Being away from friends and family, developing new relationships and coping with stress without familiar support systems.
- Living in close quarters with other students and negotiating issues and conflicts that arise.
- Managing time when neither parents nor school impose as much structure as in the past.
- Coping with increased academic demands and uncertainties.
- Determining the amount of time and method of studying necessary to be academically successful.
- Managing money.
- Handling decisions required of students on a daily basis
- Attempting to integrate new ideas, people and cultures into old thoughts, values and beliefs.
- Developing an increased awareness of life’s possibilities with decreased influences from family and friends.
- Negotiating a new relationship with family.

## What does “letting go” mean to the parent of a freshman?

- It means encouraging your college student to stay on campus over the weekends, rather than coming home.
- It means encouraging your college student to seek out new experiences.
- It means allowing your college student to make decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions.
- It means helping your college student learn to negotiate issues without stepping in to fix the problem for them.
- It means encouraging your college student to get help when it’s needed.
- It means listening without fixing.

- It means encouraging exploration rather than always sticking with what is familiar.
- It means treating your college student like the emerging adult he or she is.

Every family's situation is unique. These suggestions are guidelines, not rules. Discuss them with your family. Certainly, there are situations where parents need to become more involved rather than less. Those types of situations are addressed under "When should I intervene and when should I stand back?"

### **What should we discuss over the summer before leaving for Paul Smith's?**

The summer before a young adult enters college is a period of learning for the family. This can be a time of stress and tension. It is a summer of change.

- Expect increased tension as your young adult exerts the need for independence. While parents may want to forge a deeper connection with their young adults before they leave for college, students may want to increase their autonomy and distance from the family.
- Help your student organize the paperwork that is being sent home from Paul Smith's as well as information they will need when they arrive in the fall, but don't do it for them. You will not be here in the fall and they need to learn to cope with that.
- Your young adult will be given an academic planner to help with keeping track of important dates and events. Develop a calendar to use over the summer for his or her use. Have them get used to looking at the calendar on a daily basis and input important information.
- If you are used to waking your young adult up for school or work, have them learn to get up on their own.
- If you have been doing your young adult's laundry, have him or her do their own laundry through the summer.
- If they will be bringing a car to college, make sure they know basic car maintenance such as changing a tire and checking the oil. They should also know where the insurance and registration papers are kept. Finally, be sure your student has good snow tires and are aware of the challenges and need for caution when driving on snowy roads.
- Help them learn to balance a checkbook.
- If they are on a family-plan cell phone, ensure they understand the billing plan, the billing cycle and the cost for using too many minutes. Develop a plan if your young adult exceeds the minutes allotted to him or her.

### **Discussions parents should have with their young adult before leaving for Paul Smith's -- even if you have already had them before:**

- Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs: Understand the College's policies regarding alcohol and other drug use. Know your young adult's history with these substances. If you know your young adult will use substances, talk with them about responsible use. Talk about rape drugs, and the fact that alcohol is the number one rape drug. If you think your young adult has little or no experience with alcohol, talk about blood-alcohol content and the legal and safety consequences of a high BAC (Blood Alcohol Content), and other consumption issues. If you don't know how to discuss these issues, refer to the Parents as Partner's page and specifically the "Parents You're Not Done Yet" brochure.
- Safer sex: Talk about values in relationship to sex. Talk about the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. If you expect your young adult to be

sexually active, talk about protection and make sure he or she can get it.

- Sexual harassment and sexual assault: While Paul Smith's is considered a safe campus, it is critical to be informed, aware and smart about these issues. College students are particularly vulnerable in these areas.
- Finances: Students should understand both their financial circumstances and how much they are expected to contribute to the cost of their education. Discuss credit cards and the dangers of debt. Discuss having a budget and how your young adult will manage money. In this age of online poker and casinos, make sure you discuss the potential problems inherent in gambling. Caution them about impulse purchases on the Internet, as these can put students over their heads financially very quickly. Finances tend to be a challenging subject because any discussion of money tends to punctuate the reality of how college students are dependent on their parents. It is important that parents are sensitive to this reality and anticipate that students may get angry or distant when discussing financial matters.
- Things you probably feel the need to say even through your young adult will say "I know, I know, you have told me a million times": Eat right, get enough sleep, build in time to relax and de-stress, ask for help when you need it, you're there to get an education, make good friends, get involved, don't forget about your family, write e-mails or letters home, call home, be careful, I love you.

## **How does my role as a parent change?**

How will your relationship with your young adult change now that he or she is a college student? Most college students are in a period of limbo. They have some of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, some of the knowledge to make important decisions about their life and the freedom to make those decisions. Most college students remain financially dependent on their family, are still in the process of maturing and have the watchful eyes of their family, friends and the college on them.

While you will always be the parent to your young adult, the nature of the relationship develops, matures and takes on different roles and responsibilities. The best way to describe the role of a parent to a college young adult is one of mentor. One definition of a mentor is "a special and trusting role in which one person, the more knowing person, is in a position to help another person." Some characteristics of a mentor include:

- Listening and accepting different points of view.
- Gently challenging when it is necessary for changes in your young adult's behavior.
- Respecting your young adult's struggles and empathizing with them. But don't pity them, and don't fix the potential problem on your own.
- Looking for solutions and opportunities as well as barriers.
- Staying flexible and open.
- Changing as your young adult changes, and growing and learning as the relationship with your young adult changes.
- Taking joy in your young adult's willingness to experiment with new thoughts and ideas, especially ones that challenge your own perspectives.

While there are times and circumstances where you may need to take on a more protective role with your young adult, generally the mentorship role is the most developmentally appropriate at this stage in his or her life.

## **When should I intervene and when should I stand back?**

Parents can be challenged by some of the struggles their young adult encounters at college. Parents ask themselves if they are doing too much and taking away their young adult's opportunity to develop and mature, or doing too little and allowing their young adult to sink into the abyss. While each situation is unique, and there are no hard and fast rules, these are some general rules of thumb.

When you should stand back:

- Have your college student handle all the correspondence regarding their need and college business, but do not do it for him or her. You may help your college student identify the appropriate person(s) to speak with about a situation, or practice what he or she wants to say, but it is critical that your young adult develop negotiation skills. It may not get done perfectly or the way you would do it, but students will learn and grow from the experience. Don't let your college student suck you in by saying they cannot or do not know how to do it. Let them know that this is part of being a college student.
- There are at least two sides to every issue. Your young adult will share their perspective with you. Listen to their story and ask them what part they played in the conflict or problem, and what could they do differently. Help them problem solve. Generally, do not accept their story hook, line and sinker; do, however, show support by listening to them. The exception to this is in the area of sexual harassment or sexual assault. These are serious issues and must be handled accordingly.
- Encourage your young adult to stay on campus on the weekends during the first half of the semester. You may miss your young adult and they you. They may say the weekends are dead and boring with nothing to do, or that everyone just gets drunk on the weekend. There are many things to do here on the weekends, though, and many activities in the Tri-Lakes region. We will provide a calendar of events during the first week of school as well as lists of activities and happenings in the surrounding area. This is the time for them to make friends and bond with the school and the area.
- You may want to ask Paul Smith's personnel to watch over your young adult or ask roommates to make sure they get up or go to class. Resist the urge. It is your college student's responsibility to get themselves to class, to manage their time and to make decisions about their life. Paul Smith's is a small and caring community and we will support your young adult in a variety of ways. However, we will not usurp their freedom to make their own decisions.

When you should intervene:

- Put safety first. If you feel your college student is putting themselves in danger either emotionally or physically, it is time to become involved. If your student is feeling suicidal, getting over-involved and stressed in helping others, or is so depressed and/or anxious they are unable to perform academically, it is time to get help. If your college student is unwilling to go for help you should contact someone at Paul Smith's and share your concern. The Director of Student Development, Chief Student Affairs Officer or another college employee you have met and trust are good people to ask for help. Action will be taken.
- If your student discusses an instance of sexual harassment or sexual assault, take it seriously. Look through the Community Guide to help them determine what options are available to them. Ultimately, your student will decide what action they wish to take, and s/he can always discuss their options confidentially with the Director of Student Development.
- If you are concerned about your college student's academic performance you may contact the Registrar or Director of Retention. Based on Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, Paul Smith's cannot give you any specifics

about your student's grades. However, we can tell you if you have cause for concern.

## **What may be signs of being over-involved in my student's college experience?**

Some signs that indicate over-involvement may be:

- You are calling your student every morning to wake them for class.
- You are reading and editing your student's assignments.
- You are taking to Paul Smith's staff and faculty more than your student.
- You know any office's phone number by heart or have them on speed dial.
- Your college student is coming home every weekend.
- You are talking to your student's roommate on a regular basis.
- You know more about Paul Smith's than your college student.
- When your college student changes majors or career path it creates a crisis for you.
- You are coming to visit your college student on campus more than twice a semester.
- Because of your college student's immaturity, you need to keep a constant vigil for him or her.

You may want to add your own signs to this list and share them with your student.

## **Homesickness and the Empty Nest Syndrome**

It is not unusual for students to experience homesickness after the initial excitement of entering college has receded. As your college student realizes that college is not a temporary vacation destination but their new home, they may experience feelings of sadness and a longing for the familiar.

Conversely, parents may experience a sense of loss and emptiness. This is called the empty-nest syndrome. You may have been very involved in your college student's activities and now there is an empty space.

### **Ways you can help your college student combat homesickness**

- Keep things positive with your college student. Focus on what is going well.
- Send care packages to your college student.
- Encourage your college student to join a club or get involved in intramurals.
- Without minimizing your college student's feelings, reassure him or her that things will get better over the course of time.
- Discourage your college student from returning home every weekend.

### **Avoiding the empty-nest syndrome**

- Get involved in activities you may have had little time for in the past. Join a club, take a class, start a new hobby, start an exercise routine.
- Plan more time with your partner or friends.
- Celebrate the fact that your college student's growing independence is a sign that you have done a good job of parenting.

You may experience a type of midlife crisis. You may feel a touch of jealousy about your college student's new freedom and their life being full of possibilities. Use this as a time to re-evaluate your own life, make changes and set goals that you can still achieve.

Remember that this separation is a process and takes time and effort in moving toward healthy independence. Certainly, it can feel a bit like a balancing act between being too close or too distant. Keep the lines of communication open and ask for support and advice when you are

unclear about what to do. Paul Smith's College can help both students and families with this process.

### **Coming back home – should the rules change?**

When your college student returns home for weekends, holidays or the summer, it will be important to set up new household rules. Your young adult may expect to have the same independence and freedom he or she experienced at Paul Smith's. Parents may feel the same rules need to apply as before their student went off to college.

Negotiate rules that take into account your college student's new sense of independence, while at the same time respecting the household rules. These rules should be negotiated before leaving for school. Do not assume that this structure will fall easily into place with discussion and negotiation.

### **What if My Young Adult is Unhappy and Wants to Quit School?**

Your young adult may feel overwhelmed with the transition to college. The challenges of academics, being away from home, making new friends and dealing with increased responsibilities may lead to feelings of depression and anxiety. Your college student may feel immobilized and unable to concentrate on their studies or take care of themselves. This is a particularly challenging time for the whole family.

Some things to do to support your college student:

- Encourage your college student to reach out and talk to anyone with whom they are comfortable. Professionals at Paul Smith's can help your college student consider options.
- Discuss the reasons your college student chose to attend Paul Smith's College. Assess whether these reasons still apply.
- Identify the pros and cons of taking time off or transferring.
- Avoid treating this as a crisis, unless the situation poses a risk to your student or others.
- Try to avoid making any decisions until there has been time to look at all the options.

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### **What resources are available at Paul Smith's and who do I contact for assistance?**

[Whom to See for What](#) – A guide to staff names and phone numbers from various administrative offices who can answer your questions