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Parents' Rights (and Wrongs)

Can you call?

Can you see their grades?

What's a mother to do?

Parents walk a delicate line when their children fly away to college. No one wants to be known as a helicoptering parent, a mother or father who hovers and swoops in at the first sign of trouble. Most parents know they should cut the electronic umbilical cord (the cellphone). Yet what concerned mother can resist arguing with a professional over an unfair grade or trying to resolve a squabble among roommates?

Colleges fear that parental interferences prevents students from developing into independent and resilient adults. So they hold special orientation sessions to help parents understand what role they should play in their child's next four years. This summer, for example, the University of Vermont is offering two days of information sessions, including "Parenting From a Distance," a pilot program that will walk them through the stages of separation anxiety and offer guidance on the transition. Then again, the university has had to hire returning students as "bouncers" to keep parents from butting in on orientation events — like course registration — meant solely for incoming students. Where do you draw the line?

1

Dealing with the 'Dumping Monster'

The universal message of orientation is that parents don't need to stay out of their children's lives so much as steer them toward finding their own way.

At Northeastern University in Boston, Ronné Turner, dean of admissions, tells parents of freshmen about getting a call from a mother just five weeks into the first semester. Her son was having trouble adjusting to urban living, his room was too small, he couldn't sleep and he was unhappy in his major.

"That got it perfectly," Ms. Turner says. "She said, 'I'm calling not because I want to fix this, but what steps can I tell him to take?'"

In the first few months parents can expect a litany of such complaints from the "dumping monster," as Linda Walter, chairwoman of family orientation at Seton Hall, puts it. "The student calls home and dumps all their problems on their parents," she

says. "They say, 'This place is awful and terrible and I can't stand the food and I can't do anything', and the Mom and Dad stay up all night worrying and the kid goes out to party." Seton Hall's orientation for parents reviews common freshman-year problems like time management, setting limits and the October slump.

Parents are especially urged to stay out of roommate issues. More than any other generation, today's children are used to having their own room, TV, DVD player and phone. Sharing a cramped space, compromising about music, noise and study hours is not something most have experience with. "If at the first sign of conflict parents call Residential Life and say, 'I want the other one to move out,' students don't learn about negotiating conflict," says Mark Thompson, director of counseling and psychological services at Colgate.

"This is the most protected generation in the history of our country," he says. "Think about bicycle helmets, wood chips underneath swings in the playground, and car seats. We want to keep them from experiencing pain and discomfort, but we have to be willing to let them venture out and get that symbolic skinned knee if they are going to be prepared to take on the world after they graduate."

Parent orientations can be emotional. After learning about support services for his daughter, one Colgate father asked what kind of support was available to him when he was badly missing his daughter.

2

Ask the Alcohol Question

"One conversation we do want parents to have with their son and daughter is about alcohol and drugs, what we call the ugly side of college," says Beverly Low, dean of first-year students at Colgate. Parents should discuss their expectations with their children, about attending classes, drinking and driving, and study time versus social time.

Many colleges have online alcohol education programs with reading material for parents. One popular handout, "Parents, You're Not Done Yet," by the Century Council (centurycouncil.org), outlines conversation starters to help students make responsible decisions about alcohol: "What will you do if your roommate only wants to drink and party?" or "What will you do if you find a student passed out in the bathroom?"

Congress, too, wants parents involved in this problem. In 1988, recognizing the rampant binge drinking on campuses, the Legislature amended the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act to allow colleges to notify parents of alcohol or drug violations.

(see over)

3

Why The Report Card Never Comes

Though educators see grades as the great motivator, parents are not entitled to see them without the child's consent. The federal privacy law "isn't a parent friendly act," says Kent M. Weeks, a Nashville lawyer who is an expert on the law. Until the late 1960's, colleges acted in loco parentis, enforcing dress codes, curfews and other curbs on student behavior in place of parents.

But the privacy act of 1974 gave the child control of health, disciplinary and education records on reaching 18 or entering college.

Grades weren't really an issue until colleges started communicating electronically. Before then, they were sent to the student's home, and parents could intercept the envelope. No longer. Still, there is a way for determined parents to see how their offspring are doing. Colleges may share grades with parents who submit proof that the student is a dependent for tax purposes or if the student signs a release form. Some universities distribute forms to parents before the school year starts. But, Mr. Weeks notes, "many institutions don't want to utilize this option."

At Columbia, a spokesman says, "the preference is that the student write a letter requesting parental access." At the University of Minnesota, even if parents have been given access, they have to send a letter each semester to get a look at grades or financial statements. Its Web site warns that "the quickest, easiest way" to those grades is to ask your child to just print the out and give them to you.

Though colleges strongly discourage it, parents can also ask their children for the password to their online records.

Marianne Glauberg, who has two sons at Penn State, got the younger one's password so she could monitor his on-campus dining and modify his meal plan accordingly. "If you have extra money in the plan at the end of the year, you lose it," she says. She wanted to shift money of the plan but "I couldn't do it without the password and he wouldn't ever look at it." In theory, that gives her access to his email, but she doesn't go there: "Too much information."

4

The Time To Jump In

In a closely watched case, the parents of Elizabeth Shin sued the Massachusetts Institute of technology in 2002 for \$27 million, charging that the college had failed to prevent their daughter's apparent suicide. M.I.T. did not inform them of her deteriorating psychological state. The suite was settled in April, but the terms were not disclosed.

The case left unsettled the question of liability concerns of students with mental health problems. Some colleges have begun to suspend students who require intensive psychological support. But this, too, has led to a backlash. In March, a student at George Washington University sued after he was suspended for seeking treatment for depression at the university hospital, contending that his suspension violated the Americans With Disabilities Act. The case is pending.

Over the last five years, colleges have become more inclined to notify parents earlier when they perceive a student to be in trouble, says Gary Pavela, director of judicial programs at the University of Maryland at College Park and author of "Questions and Answers on College Student Suicide: A Law and Policy Perspective," published in June. But parents need not wait for that emergency to develop. If a child seems headed for danger — academic, emotional or physical — it is important to intervene.

"The goal for parents is in finding the right balance," Mr. Pavela says. "One extreme is hovering over them and micromanaging their life, and the other extreme is assuming that a student, particularly on a large campus, is going to find a mentor or guide or even counselor who is somehow going to see them as whole person and understand the dynamics of their personality."

"There is a role for parents," he says, "to approach a dean or resident hall director not as a nuisance but in a team approach to working with a student who may be going through a crisis."