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The Older Adolescent Leaving Home: Building Awareness and Resilience for all Family Members

The older adolescent leaving home for college has two life tasks: experiencing the loss of the familiar of family, friends, and high school, and simultaneously transitioning to the experience of college, meeting new people and meeting the academic requirements.

Experiencing the Loss of the Familiar:

Some researchers describe going to college as a "mini grief experience". Leaving home is a loss of familiar; loved ones and friends, routines, the geographical area, their car, their room. Some adolescents will articulate their feelings of loss and missing Mom, Dad, a sister and or a brother, and or the family pet.

The Parent and Adolescent Relationship

Many adolescents may need help in understanding what is happening. They may have the experience of homesickness, without the words to articulate what they are feeling. When Dad says, "I miss you" it can help the adolescent to understand it's okay to articulate feelings of missing loved ones. When the adolescent hears "I miss you"; she can experience being missed. Certainly when adults acknowledge their feelings, the adolescent may feel invited to begin to identify their own feelings, that previously felt confusing to them. The adolescent may not articulate their feelings. The important issue is the adults' in the family are articulating their own emotions and giving a safe space to their children to talk about their emotions. The expression of feelings is voiced by parents as an acknowledgement that their son or daughter is no longer with them 24/7; an acknowledgement of the major shift that is evolving. Feelings are not used in a manipulative way, to hold the adolescent back, rather an acknowledgement that parents are adjusting to their adolescent not being home with them. Missing feelings can be coupled with the parent's hope and want for their child to make their own way at college. There is the acknowledgement of letting go coupled with "If you need us, we are here, no matter what you can call us".

The Leaving Adolescent and Siblings

The age of the sibling and the relationship the siblings' had, will affect the sibling's emotional response to their big brother or sister leaving for college. Some siblings may look forward to their sibling going to college, and experience an initial relief from squabbles and arguments, then be confused by missing their sibling. The sibling may feel reticent to acknowledge that they miss their older brother or sister, and or reticent to express they are glad their older sibling is at college. This can be an opportunity for the adults in the family to acknowledge that in situations and in relationships we have very mixed feelings.

In a relationship we can be very upset by someone, and have a 'fighting-competitive' relationship, and under all that fighting is a deep caring and love. Helping the younger sibling sift

through their mixed feelings about their older sibling, and helping them understand that feelings can change from day to day. The older adolescent leaving can be a stimulus for the family to talk on a deeper level about feelings and past situations.

The younger child may deeply miss the older sibling, who may have served in the role of a surrogate parent. Perhaps special times can be created between a parent and younger child, such as looking at photos of the family and talking about each family member. Helping the younger child understand that big brother has a special place in his heart for little brother, whether he is home or at college. Drawings may help the child express his or her feelings about their older sibling being away. Phone calls in which, only the younger child talks to big sister, may help touch that empty place the child is feeling.

Acknowledging Reality

If the adolescent had a very argumentative relationship with a parent, the parent can talk to their spouse or a trusted friend about their relief along with their feelings of loss of not having the relationship they wanted to have with their adolescent. Getting counseling may assist the parents to take the time to look at what patterns were created within the arguing, and how to begin the process of establishing different ways of relating. College may give the family a "breather" from a difficult relationship and time to receive help and heal the hurt of both the child and the parent/s. Healing the hurt will take a commitment to look at the past dynamic and establish different ways of communicating.

Regrets

No matter how we have parented, most likely we will experience regrets over what we have done or not done. This is an inevitable part of parenting. None of us will do a "perfect" job. If regrets begin to haunt you during this stage of transition, seek out a trusted friend or therapist to whom you can voice your regrets. Perhaps feelings of guilt or shame will come up for you, at this time. The best weapon against shame is to talk about what happened with someone who deeply understands the trials of being a parent. You may want to apologize to your adolescent about a certain time period in your lives that was especially difficult for you, in which your relationship with your child was strained. Remembering even with our mistakes, we have been "good enough" parents through much of our children's lives, may provide comfort.

Excitement and Celebration

Woven within the experience of an adolescent going to college is the reality that your child is spreading her wings. Yes, you will always be the parent and you have nurtured and loved and pushed and pulled enough for your adolescent to be spreading her wings. A new level of independence with an evolving level of contact with your older adolescent is the threshold you have all reached. Celebrate all each of you has accomplished!

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