

Parental Involvement during Students' Transition to College: Mixed Attitudes and Recommendations for "Ideal" Involvement

Tyler E. Smith

Parents have become increasingly involved in their children's transitions to college over the past 15 to 20 years for various reasons. Overall, parental involvement is typically beneficial for children's adaptation and success in new environments; however, it is less clear whether this is helpful as children move into early adulthood. The current article explores various reasons for increases in parental involve during the last 15 to 20 years. In addition, the idea of parental over-involvement (e.g., helicopter parents) is explored. Further, students have recommended ways in which parents can effectively support them as they transition to college. The article concludes with recommendations for parents to develop an "ideal" amount of parental involvement in order to support students as they transition to college.

A transition is defined as "Any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). One particularly difficult transition can be from high school to college. Students enter first-year experiences with differing levels of developmental abilities (e.g., autonomy and independence) that are critical components of college success (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011). Edelman (2013) suggests that students' autonomy and independence during this transition is likely influenced both positively and negatively by parental involvement in their academic and social development. Parental involvement is defined as the participation of significant caregivers in activities that promote the educational process of students to support their academic and social well-being and development (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). For various reasons, throughout the past two decades parents have become increasingly involved in students' transition to college and first-year experiences (Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012). Although parental involvement is typically helpful for children's adaptation and success in new environments (Smith, Reinke, Herman & Huang, in press; Sheridan, Smith, Kim, Beretvas, & Park, in press), it is less clear whether it is helpful as children move into early adulthood. There are mixed attitudes regarding the importance and value of parental involvement during this time. The following article: (1) explores the recent literature on parent-child interaction during the college transition, (2) presents differing viewpoints and empirical evidence for the appropriate degree

Tyler E. Smith, Ph.D., Department of Educational, School, & Counseling Psychology, University of Missouri-Columbia.

to which parents should be involved during this critical development period, and (3) presents recommendations for appropriate parent-child interactions during the college transition.

Recent Increases in Parent Involvement

Parents continue to become increasingly involved as their children transition to college. One reason for this increase may be due to societal emphasis on the importance of parenting (Harper et al., 2012). Parents who have historically been involved with students throughout development may also believe they need to be involved in the same way during students' college transition.

A second reason may be due to rising college costs. Parents are often likely to contribute to students' tuition or other costs associated with college, leading to an increased sense of entitlement regarding their child's success in college (Harper et al., 2012). Another contributing factor is access to technology, namely smartphones and video-chat applications, which makes it simpler for parents to stay constantly connected with their children. This feasibility of communication creates more opportunities for parents to talk with students about their transition while raising parents' awareness of specific things such as academic work (Harper et al., 2012). Generationally, we are also at a point where a growing number of parents attended college themselves. Past college attendance from parents has increased expectations for their children to do the same, also likely creating a sense of entitlement when parents feel their children should take a similar path.

In 2009, Carleton College administered multiple surveys assessing various items related to first-year students' transitions to college (Carleton College, 2013). Results showed that, compared to past students, many current students were likely to hold their parents in higher esteem. A majority (54%) of undergraduates named their parents as heroes. The reasons students chose parents as heroes related to sacrifices parents made and encouragements parents provided. Carleton College also surveyed their Department of Student Affairs and other Midwest universities in 2008 and 2011 (Carleton College, 2013). They found that between 2001 and 2008, incoming students reporting mental health issues increased by 68% for community colleges, and 90% for four-year colleges. Additionally, between 2008 and 2011, 77 percent of colleges surveyed had increased use of their university psychological services. Some have argued that the current generation of students may be "coddled" by parents, and thus do not have the coping and problem-solving skills necessary for college. Further, when students do not have these necessary skills, they are likely to seek the guidance of a parent (Carleton College, 2013).

Mixed Attitudes: Are Parents Helping or Hindering Students' Transition to College?

Clearly, parental involvement may be increasing for numerous reasons, but mixed attitudes exist regarding the importance of parental involvement during this

period of development. Many have made arguments against parental involvement, citing problems with being a “helicopter parent.” A helicopter parent is a parent who constantly intervenes in his/her child’s life with the goal of helping and/or eliminating potential difficulties (White, 2005). White (2005) suggests this may negatively affect students socially while also decreasing their abilities to develop autonomy. This behavior may also undercut students’ opportunities for success; indeed, campus officials are reporting an influx of freshmen students who lack basic skills (e.g., ability to negotiate with roommates, planning a course schedule). Parent over-involvement may also influence the larger university system as a whole. Specifically, students’ limited independence skills can negatively influence application processes, relationships with peers and faculty, and career development strategies (Hunt, 2008).

Conflicting research indicates that when most students are transitioning to college, helicopter parents only represent a small percentage of college students’ parents (Cutright, 2008). A 2008 survey from the Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) found that media has likely contributed to a popular image of modern parents as over-involved in their student’s transition to college (Hoover, 2008). Despite these negative stereotypes towards parents, administrators and faculty members are reporting that parents are typically more of a help than a hindrance. Additionally, the same survey found that nearly 25% of students wished their parents had been more involved in decisions they made during their first year (e.g., choosing their courses; Hoover, 2008).

Contrary to the idea of the over-bearing helicopter parent, research supports parental involvement as a beneficial component of students’ social and academic development. For instance, Shoup, Gonyea, and Kuh (2009) used a 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement to assess approximately 4,500 first-year students and found that students with highly involved parents reported higher levels of engagement with peers and educational outcomes. Additionally, students who perceived high attachment with parents were also likely to report higher levels of social support and decreased feelings of social anxiety (Larose & Boivin, 1998), and have higher educational aspirations (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Lastly, Edelman (2013) found that parental communication during students’ transitions were likely to increase students’ abilities to develop autonomy and independence.

Recommendations for “Ideal” Parental Involvement

For better or for worse, parental involvement has the ability to influence students’ college transition. It is critical to understand why parental involvement has recently increased and to know differing viewpoints and empirical research on the subject. A well-rounded understanding can help parents determine how exactly to be involved in their children’s lives during this critical developmental transition period. With this understanding, it is important for parents and college students to consider an “ideal” amount of involvement during students’ transition. Specifically, student-reported data indicates that successful transitioning involves parents who are open to communication, supportive to students during difficult

times, able to provide verbal and physical reinforcement, and not “over-bearing” (Edelman, 2013; Crede & Niehooster, 2011, Clark, 2005). Based on this review, it is recommended that parents and students consider the following in an attempt to develop and maintain “ideal” parental involvement:

1. *Set clear expectations prior to transition.* These expectations should be dependent on students’ expectations prior to college. Further, these expectations can transition from shared roles to independent roles for students as they gain independence.
2. *Encourage and support autonomy.* This should involve allowing students to try novel activities while simultaneously being provided some guidance and support from parents.
3. *Open-door policy (somewhat) regarding communication.* Parents need to create an atmosphere that allows their children to know it is okay to contact them when they feel it is necessary. However, parents should also slowly decrease advice/instruction, so as to give their children opportunities to solve problems independently.
4. *Offer support to students during difficult times.* Parents should be aware of especially difficult times during students’ transitions and first year of college (e.g., during the first few weeks of school, finals week, and particularly difficult course loads).
5. *Check in regarding grades and social life.* This should be done periodically, so as to determine how students are succeeding or struggling both academically and socially. However, this is not meant to be done every single day.
6. *Provide affirmation to students who are succeeding.* As parents check in and maintain periodic contact with their children, it is important to consistently provide verbal praise, in addition to other forms of reinforcement (e.g., taking children out to dinner).

Above all, it is important for parents and children to maintain relationships as children transition to college. Most research supports the idea that parental involvement is beneficial to social and academic development (Larose & Boivin, 1998; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). However, helicopter parents can also keep children from gaining skills critical to developing independence as adults. In order to maintain strong parent-child relationships, an “ideal” amount of parent involvement must be utilized. Although the above recommendations may not be perfect for every parent-child relationship, they can be used as guidelines to support children during a time that can often be difficult and full of uncertainty

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