

Listening to and understanding your college student

Introduction

Allow me to extend another welcome to Whitman to all of you visiting this weekend. We are from the Whitman College Peer Listeners, a student run organization through the Whitman Counseling Center that provides trained listeners to be there for students whenever they need someone to talk with. We are not trained counselors, but like to think of ourselves more as a sounding board for students that just need to talk.

We are going to talk today about some important issues when communicating with your son or daughter. Now that they have gone off to college, your student has essentially been living on their own for the past few months. They have been making their own decisions about how they should be eating, how much they should sleep and study, and even how they want to do their laundry. The point is that they have not had a parent around, and thus, going back into that environment can be something of a difficult transition. Now, this most certainly does NOT mean that you are now obsolete, it simply means that there are some things that you may want to take into consideration when you are communicating with your son or daughter.

Psychologist Carl Rogers has developed a model of three conditions for counseling. These principles can be applied to various other applications including when parents talk with their sons or daughters. The three conditions are:

1. Unconditional positive regard
2. Communication of accurate empathy
3. Genuineness

As we are going through the examples, look to see if you can pick out some examples of these characteristics.

All of these three conditions involve communicating with your student, which is really the key to a positive relationship. In the next few minutes, the Peer Listeners Players are going to act out a series of skitlets that are good and bad ways of communicating with your college student. Some important things to remember throughout is something that we go through in Peer Listener training. When you are talking with your son or daughter, really listen to them. Give them their time to talk without interruption. After they have had their chance to speak, then you take yours.

In the following examples, take note of the two different ways of communicating that each example utilizes. There is a stark contrast in the way that the parent presents, and thus a stark difference in the response from the student.

Personal Space

A student is asleep at 8am and gets awoken by the phone. Gets up to answer it.

Parent: I tried Calling you at 10 last night and I tried again at 11:30. Where were you?

Student: I was out. It was Friday night!

Parent: That's no excuse for me not being able to get a hold of you! I was really worried!

Student: I was just out with friends! Why don't you trust me?

DING

Parent calls in the afternoon and student answers it.

Parent: Hi, I tried calling you at 11 last night, but you were out, so I was wondering if you got my message.

Student: Yeah, I got it this morning. Did you have something important to tell me?

Parent: Not particularly, just checking in. Did you have fun last night?

Student: Yeah...it doesn't bother you that I'm out late, does it?

Parent: Not really, as long as you return my calls pretty quickly.

Moral: Parents should realize that their students are living in a different environment and although it's natural to feel anxious about your student, you must let them have some personal space. If you try to trust your child, they are much more likely to be truthful and not feel resentful of you. Try to be reasonable about the behavior you expect from your student and let them have the independence to make their own choices.

Drugs

The student is home on break and comes in from hanging out with friends.

Parent: How was your day?

Student: Good.

Parent: You smell like pot! Have you been getting high?

Student: What if I was?

Parent: Don't you know what that stuff can do to you? It will rot your brain and kill you! What do you think you are you doing?

DING

Parent: how was your day?

Student: Good.

Parent: You smell like pot! Have you been getting high?

Student: What if I was?

Parent: I worry about you. I hope you would tell me.

Student: Well yeah, I was.

Parent: I'm glad you told me. Are you aware of the consequences? Let me know if you ever want to talk about it.

Moral: Be open to your students' new experiences in college. They may have come to school a volleyball player and will come home a soccer player. Your student will

test new boundaries and figure out what is right and what is wrong for them. You have taught them to think for themselves and now it is time to let them do just that.

Grades

Student is talking on phone to mother

Parent: How are classes going, honey?

Student: Pretty good. My core class is interesting and my art class is really fun. I'm having some problems in Chemistry, though. I got a C on my last test.

Parent: A C? Why haven't you been studying? You never got Cs in high school! We aren't paying 25 grand a year for you to play around and screw up your life!

DING

Parent: How are classes going, honey?

Student: Pretty good. My core class is interesting and my art class is really fun. I'm having some problems in Chemistry, though. I got a C on my last test.

Parent: Why'd you get a C? Do you not understand the work? Have you talked to your professor about it? Is there something I can help with?

Student: Nah, I just didn't understand the chapter as well as I thought I did. I've talked to my professor and we're working on ways for me to do better on the next one.

Moral: Be open to other possibilities when your students grades aren't as good as they once were. Whitman is a tough school and college is a whole different experience than high school. Take the time to find out what's going on and don't simply jump to the conclusion that your student is slacking off.

Some other important skills that can be extremely useful when talking with your student are active listening skills.

Listening skills explained. Pass out handout.