

## CHAPTER TWO

# The College Years

As parents, we can become wrapped up in the pressure of our kids getting into college. One parent in Pacific Palisades, California, busted into a closed post office in hopes of finding his daughter's college acceptance letter. He found himself arrested instead. Then there are the emotions we don't want to feel when it comes to letting go and packing them off, which we really don't want to do. In the midst of all the stress and activity, it's hard to think about transforming our relationships with our now-becoming-adult children.

Leaving home for college should be viewed as a big step toward being a fully independent, self-supporting adult. Most college kids do not support themselves and are not necessarily thinking about being independent, except where it suits them—no curfew, no drinking prohibition, being able to have a messy room without compunction (unless they have a fastidious roommate, one of those kids you wish were yours). Nevertheless, the college years, from the very first day, should be seen as the bridge toward independence.

One issue is the college student's room in his parents' house. These words were chosen carefully. A college kid comes home for holidays and summers. He has gotten to the dorm or college apartment stage, but not to the "his own place" stage. Parents tend to keep the room exactly as it was when their kid left, like a shrine. Why not, before the young adult goes off to college, ask him to decide which of his childhood memorabilia he wants to keep and how he wants to store it, and make the room into one that an adult would feel comfortable staying in? The kid will probably rebel against this suggestion because it's work and he's lazy. Also he wants to hold on to his childhood. It's up to you to pry it away. If you change the room, when

the young adult comes to “visit,” he will not be returning to his high school (or junior high) milieu. That might help everyone—the college student and his parents—take steps toward separating from each other.

We can't wait until summer vacations for the family to be whole again. Then the kid shows up and we end up running a free hotel with an annoying guest. How about insisting before he gets home that he get a job to help pay for his education? Then summers provide another step toward growing up and growing away.

Which brings us to the issue of money. Parents sometimes get into the mode of overreacting when it comes to money. It is helpful for parents to come to some decisions early in the game, before college begins. What exactly will you pay for and how much? Do you want your child to have a job during college? Each family will have a different expectation, but whatever it is, it should be thought out ahead of time, shared with your child, and, except in extreme mitigating circumstances, stuck to. Most of us have a hard time doing that.

Another issue is loss. The empty-nest loss is real and needs to be mourned, not denied. Parents sometimes unconsciously spend the year, particularly the first, waiting for their son or daughter to come home and are ambivalent about the dance or skiing with friends that keeps the kid away. Sometimes parents want to seduce their college kid into coming home on weekends with promises of getting their laundry done or shopping trips.

The adult child who is not fully independent can easily regress. Parents should not encourage regression by trying to re-create the world the child left. Although things may look sort of the same, it really is a whole new world. Get used to it. Celebrate it. Raising children can be interesting, hectic, fun, and many other things. Watching them grow into responsible adults is extraordinarily rewarding.

So congratulations, they're going to college. And congratulations, one day soon you'll be able to convert their room into a den.

---

*Furious Randolph*

Dear Gail and Susan,

Our son Randy Jr. earned exceptional grades in high school and got into a good college. My wife and I were thrilled and de-

cided to stretch ourselves financially to pay for his education. He's been at college for two months and he sold his car to buy a motorcycle! I am furious for several reasons. We bought him the car. Shouldn't he have asked us before he sold it? And a motorcycle is dangerous. When I asked Randy why he did it, he said it was more fun than a car. We didn't send him to college to look for ways to have fun. What do we do about the motorcycle? And how do we prevent him from spending money like this in the future?

Randolph

All Right, Randolph,

Whose name was the car title in? If it was in your name, he would have no right to sell it. So, in the future, you should keep a major purchase in your name. Your money. Your name. (I don't remember if I did this when I bought my kids' cars but I should have.)

Good news. Since you're supporting him, you have the right to give and to take away. Take away the damn motorcycle. He'll hate you for it, but not forever. You'll hate yourself if Randy Jr. gets in an accident and you didn't do anything about it.

I heard a story about a college kid and a motorcycle not long ago. He's a man now and lucky to have lived. When he was in school, he decided to visit someone, probably a girlfriend at another school. He started out on his bike and it started to snow. In his young mind, he decided to push ahead rather than go back. (Obviously he was thinking with his body parts, not his mind.) He ended up skidding into a snowbank and spending the night packed in ice.

You also wrote that you didn't send him to college to look for ways to have fun. I agree with you. You worked hard to pay for his education and he owes it to you to work hard to get it. Young college students away from home for the first time feel their freedom and sometimes go overboard. Their brains and reasoning powers haven't fully developed yet. Don't worry. All the good lessons and morals you taught him while

he was growing up, he won't forget. I think you can count on him being a decent person.

Gail, who obviously despises motorcycles

*First, the issue of whether Randy had the right to sell the car. Either the car is Randy's, in which case he can sell it, or the car is owned by Randolph, and Randy is the designated user of the vehicle and he may not sell it. It seems to me that Randy must have had the title documents, so I surmise that Randolph at least implied it was Randy's car.*

*When we give our kid a car, we should clarify who owns it, who maintains it, who pays for the registration and insurance, and who has the right to sell it. Kids sometimes want to leave the car ownership ambiguous because then they can believe they own it without taking full responsibility for its costs. Parents sometimes want to leave the car ownership ambiguous, because they can give a car but think they still have control over the driver. The ambiguity speaks to neither the parent nor the child wanting to fully separate.*

*In fact, we should clarify ownership of all the stuff we send our kids to college with—cars, microwaves, televisions, computers, etc. Are they on loan and do we have plans for them after college or are they gifts and so the property of the student?*

*Now, the issue of the motorcycle. My impression is that Randy, the exceptional student, wants to experiment with a new persona—less button-downed, wilder, perhaps; perhaps less like his father. This kind of identity experimentation is age appropriate for the college student.*

*Obviously, we don't want our college students to do anything potentially harmful to themselves, whether it's driving a car unsafely or drunk, doing drugs, or, as Randolph and Gail believe, riding a motorcycle.*

*What can Randolph do? Gail, I think Randy's over eighteen and therefore not a minor, which means that Randolph can't legally take the motorcycle. But he can go to his neighborhood police station, get information about motorcycle accidents, laws, and safety, and respectfully pass it on to Randy. He can also strongly voice his hopes that Randy ride safely and with good judgment. He*

*can tell Randy his concerns without getting into a power struggle or being condescending or infantilizing. In other words, Randolph should treat Randy like an adult who made a personal choice, so the motorcycle doesn't become Randy's fight for independence. A few times of riding in the heat, the rain, and perhaps the snow and Randy may be ready to trade back to a more comfortable car.*

*As to the rest of Randolph's letter, I don't object to college students having fun, provided they fulfill the expectations for grades and career planning. As far as Randy's spending is concerned, Randolph and his son can make an expense budget and Randolph can send the money agreed upon. But he can't control how Randy spends the money he gets for selling his property.*

*Susan*

## *Philosophy Major*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My daughter Leanne has decided to major in philosophy. When I asked her what she was planning to do with that major, meaning what kind of career she was thinking about, she said she wasn't. She just liked philosophy and would worry about a career after she graduated. When I told my husband, he hit the roof. Isn't Leanne being cavalier with our money? Do we have a say in what she majors in?

Serena

Serena with a Husband Who Hit the Roof,

You don't have a say in what your daughter majors in. I imagine there was a time in the way distant past—and by the past I mean anything prior to 1967—when a parent might have been able to speak to a person connected to the university that they sent their child to. Those days are long gone.

Every parent I know whose kid majored in philosophy had a minor nervous breakdown about it. They saw what you saw, that their child wasn't prepared to have a career. Cheer up, Serena. Since your daughter is still in school, here's what you

can do: Give Leeanne a reality check. Get the Help Wanted section from a major newspaper. Prove to your daughter that there are no jobs in what she's majoring in. I showed my adorable, college-bound children the Help Wanted section in the *New York Times* before they left for school. There they could easily see what jobs there were for college graduates. So in a way, it wasn't me telling them, it was the *Times* telling them. Then I told them they could be an artist if they did brain surgery as a hobby.

Gail, who's pretty smart about these things

*Gail, to my mind the problem isn't that Leeanne wants to major in philosophy. It's true that you can't get a job as a "philosopher," and that there are very few jobs teaching philosophy. However, philosophy is a good major for law school as well as other graduate programs. For me Leeanne's problem is her refusal to anticipate her future until after college. She wants to go along day to day like a young child.*

*Gail, back in our day, a liberal arts degree alone would get you a job. The world has changed a lot since we went to school. Now jobs require special preparation. Students need to plan ahead. Despite that reality, there are college students who drift through four years without appropriate career goals or a good plan for after graduation. These kids are more likely to move home, because they have resisted the next developmental step: choosing their adult work life.*

*I know that deciding on an occupation can be daunting for a college student. He can legitimately argue that with his limited experience, he can't know what he wants to do for the rest of his life. However, life often requires that we make decisions without knowing the future.*

*A college student should make the best choice he can about a career and adjust later if he has to. College is the time for learning to take on an adult way of thinking, which includes anticipating and planning for the future.*

*Serena and her husband should make the expectation of completing this task clear to Leeanne. After hearing what her parents*

*have to say, Leeanne may think differently. But if she continues to have difficulty with this developmental step, they should suggest she see her academic adviser and/or a counselor at her school's student health services.*

*Susan*

### *Probation Problem*

Dear Gail and Susan,

I have a very short question. Cutting to the chase, my son Arlen's college grades are awful, and not because he couldn't do the work. He was put on probation. Should we penalize him in any way for goofing off? Do we continue to send him the same amount of spending money we used to?

Nelson

Please, Nelson,

You didn't have a very short question. You had two questions and they're complicated. However, I'm going to keep my answers short. When a college student goes on probation, it's a shock to him and his parents. You can punish a kid in high school by taking away privileges. Unless your son lives at home, it's impossible to do that. First, Nelson, I would write him a very serious letter explaining that he has to get on board and that if he flunks out you're not going to send him to another school and that he'll have to get a low-level job and move out. Make it a letter in an envelope with a stamp—not an e-mail. E-mails are too casual. Then I would warn him that you're going to send him less money. He should only receive money for necessities. The two of you can work out that budget. Scare him. That's what he needs.

Gail, who hates being scared

*Gail, we don't know if this is Arlen's first semester and he is having trouble adjusting to the demands of college courses. If so, Nelson*

*should advise him to see his academic adviser. If Arlen is further along in school and this is a sudden change, he may be struggling over picking a major or a breakup with his girlfriend, or he may have gotten into drugs, in which case he should see a counselor at his school's student health services.*

*That being said, probation is serious. It's a wake-up call. If Arlen doesn't heed it, he will be thrown out. Nelson should let the college system work and not add any penalties to the situation.*

*Regarding money: If Nelson is financing trips to Bermuda or online gambling, he should stop. But if he is sending Arlen reasonable spending money for food and books, then nothing should change.*

*However, I would certainly encourage Nelson to warn Arlen that if he is not in school, he is on his own financially. And Nelson should follow through with cutting Arlen off if he is kicked out.*

Susan

## *Private Grades*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My daughter's college won't tell us her grades and she won't, either. We have no idea how she's doing—if she's doing well or in danger of flunking out. Iris says that she's an adult and has the right to privacy about her grades. But my husband and I think that if we're paying, we have rights, too . . . to know if our money is being squandered. We are stymied and angry about this situation, but feel stuck.

Ethel

My Dearest Stuck,

The '60s (which were strange partially because they started in the late '60s and ended around 1977) brought many advancements and some aggravation. Colleges used to send grades to parents. Then thousands of students did sit-ins in the halls of administration buildings because they were fighting for student rights. One of the rights they got was privacy about



grades. Personally I think when kids do well, they're proud to show their parents their grades.

Still, you're the parent and if you feel you should know your daughter's grades, insist upon it. I believe that when dealing with college kids, money not only talks, it screams. You can send more to reward her or less to deprive her. Child psychologists think the reward system is more effective than punishment. I disagree because some children, especially boys, especially one of mine, needed very little and never reacted to my taking things away. When I was in school, I would have been devastated to have my allowance cut.

Sorry, Gail

*Iris makes an interesting argument about the right to privacy, but like all rationalizations, it sounds good but is simply wrong. Parents pay for their kid to go to college as an investment in their child's future. An investor is entitled to regular reports about the progress of his investment. Iris should therefore produce her grades. If she refuses, her parents have the right to withdraw their money and invest it elsewhere.*

Susan

### *Bart's Assistant*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son is a freshman in college. His name is Bart. Bart feels a little in over his head. A lot of it is my fault. I used to help Bart with his school projects and papers. I actually liked doing it and it meant he got good grades. I knew that he could do the work, but because he was always a high-energy kid, he was somewhat disorganized and a real procrastinator. So I helped him focus and plan. Well, now he's in college with the same problems. He called me to ask if I would do some research for his paper in anthropology. The subject interests me, so I wouldn't mind. My husband says that I shouldn't, that Bart needs to learn to do his own work. But I got him used to my help. Can I just cut him off

now that the stakes are higher? His grades matter even more now than they did before, if he wants to get into a good professional school or get a good job.

Corinne

Dear Bart's Assistant,

Who went to high school, you or Bart? Who's going to college, you or Bart? Who will go to graduate school, you or Bart? When our children are young, it's important to teach them good skills. Parents, by supervising homework, can teach their children how to focus, plan, and organize, and you did that. But finally it's important to let go so that our children can do these things on their own. Your husband is right. (I love when they are. It makes my job easier.) You, Corinne, have not let go, and Bart hasn't, either. However, if he has any ability or memory, he knows what he has to do. He's lazy.

About his grades mattering even more now than they did before, that's his problem. Get it? Either he does the work or he doesn't get into a good professional school. Maybe he's better off in a simple job, one where his mother does not have to come to work with him.

If you want to study anthropology, why don't you go back to school? I'll bet Bart won't help you.

Gail, who didn't like doing homework

*There are three issues here. One is Bart's problem with disorganization and procrastination. Rather than do his work for him in high school, Corinne should have sent him to a class that taught him how to study and write papers. Rather than do Bart's research in college, Corinne should suggest that Bart talk to his academic adviser to locate a similar class at college.*

*The second issue comes up often with parents. Corinne says it's her fault and because she got Bart used to her help, she can't ever withdraw it. Nonsense! Whenever you realize that you've done the wrong thing with a kid, apologize and stop doing it. Of course Corinne can cut him off.*

*The third issue is Bart and Corinne's mutual delusion. Bart doesn't want to take responsibility and accept and deal with his limitations. Corinne doesn't want to let go and accept Bart's real capabilities. If they both don't stop mythologizing Bart's capacity, they are in for a rude awakening when Bart gets out into the real work world.*

Susan

### *Finding Ira*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son Ira has completed two years of college. He did well, but now he has to declare a major and has no idea what he wants to do with his life after school. Ira thinks that taking a year off to travel will give him the time and opportunity to "find himself" so he can decide on a career path. Is that a good idea? And what about the finances of it? It's not as though it would substitute for a year of college. We would still have to pay for the remaining two years after he found himself.

Greta

Dear Ira's Mom,

Some children don't know what they want to do by the time they're required to declare a major and they're frightened by their inability to choose. They have to choose anyway. A friend of mine told her children to choose premed or prelaw and she very clearly stated they didn't have to become a doctor or a lawyer, but that one day they might want to. That tactic sounds good to me. They would at least have a good education.

Tell Ira that if he doesn't find himself, he should find himself a job or find himself in the military. Traveling won't make him focus on himself and I've seen that most children who leave school don't go back.

Most of us feel obligated to get our children educated, but we're not obligated to send them traveling. If you can afford

it, send yourself to Europe, but wait until the dollar is more stable.

Gail, who's right once again

*"Finding himself"—Gail, what does that really mean? It implies that Ira is lost and confused about how to proceed. Okay, in other words, he doesn't know how (or want) to move on to the next stage of life, which is deciding what career college is going to prepare him for. Can a year of travel make a difference? Two months in Europe with his girlfriend and the next nine months hanging out on Greta's couch won't help Ira move on. Is the year off then just a delaying tactic?*

*My point is that at this stage of a young adult's life—Ira is at least twenty, maybe older—he should be thinking, investigating, and planning, not drifting and hoping for inspiration.*

*I would like to see the young adult who is uncertain about his career choice explore fields of study and work. Greta can suggest that Ira take some courses in subjects he might be interested in. Also, colleges have alumni internships whereby a student can spend a summer working in a field he is considering.*

Susan

## Gerald, the Sloppy

Dear Gail and Susan,

It is summertime and I am tearing my hair out. My son Gerald is home from college. Actually, he isn't home, except sometimes to sleep (but not always), to eat when he's hungry and doesn't have an offer for a meal elsewhere, to get money when he needs it, and to mess up his room. When I ask him to tell me when he'll be home or to commit to being here for dinner, he gets very irritated. He says I'm treating him like a child.

I understand that he lives his own, independent life at college where he can come and go as he pleases, but we're not just a rooming house with kitchen privileges. Should I just let him do as he wants or does he have some responsibility to us? I told Gerald I was writing to you. He said something about your both

being mothers, so not exactly credible, but you are to me. Please advise.

Georgia

Dear Summer-Aggravated Parent,

First of all, I want to thank you for finding me credible. It's the most wonderful compliment coming from a stranger.

Summertime is a fabulous time for college kids and a nightmare for their parents, unless you have any of those extraordinary offspring who come home, get a job, keep their room clean, and report about their whereabouts. That's very rare, if not completely nonexistent. It only happens when parents and their children have an understanding of what is going to happen over the summer, before the summer. You should have told him that he had to get a job, be clean, and show up. You'll tell him next year.

Your perception of why college students cause chaos on vacation is perfect. When they're independent, they can do whatever they want. They choose to be messy and irresponsible. My sons were in the same fraternity, and you can't believe what it was like. They cleaned it all up every September and messed it all up during the rest of the year. I had to repeat to myself over and over again that someday it would be their wives' problem and eventually it was.

As far as telling you when he'll be home, or committing to dinner, you're going to have to tell him that you're not running a boardinghouse, and when he screams and says you're treating him like a child, tell him it's because that's how he behaves. If you can sit him down long enough, explain that people who are living together have a responsibility to one another. If he balks at this, do an intervention. Have the whole family surprise him, preferably early on a Sunday morning when he's still in bed. Talk about how he's behaving and why it's important to be part of his family. Don't stop talking until he gets it.

Gail, who knows a lot of people who went through this and lived to tell about it

*If you invited an adult friend to visit and he hardly spoke to you, raided your refrigerator, scattered his clothes, didn't communicate where he was going or when he was coming back, and asked for money on top of it, you would never invite him again. But Gerald, who does all of the above, will be invited for every summer and holiday because it's his "family home."*

*The problem, it seems to me, comes from not clearly focusing on the college years, including summers, as a transitional time for the whole family. Gerald is transitioning from being financially dependent and living in the family home to supporting himself and living in his own abode. The family is transitioning from being fully responsible for its children to facing an empty nest and letting go. Both Georgia and Gerald need to accept that things will be different from the way they were before college began.*

*It's a myth that Gerald "lives his own, independent life" at college, because he does not pay the bills. True independence means you support yourself entirely. Georgia and Gerald need to recognize and accept that the kid is still dependent on his parents, and with that dependence comes responsibility. The areas Georgia should discuss and decide about with her son are curfew, family obligations, paying for personal expenses, maybe doing chores, and calling when he'll be late.*

*Likewise, Georgia can't expect family life to be exactly as it was; it needs to be redefined. Gerald does live a more independent life in college than he did when he was in high school. Parents should acknowledge the change and agree to more freedoms. Perhaps Gerald will not be required to attend daily family meals or all the family outings.*

*Before summer and the return home of the college student, the family should discuss requirements, expectations, responsibilities, and freedoms, including whether the student is expected to work and what he is financially responsible for.*

*If Gerald balks, Georgia might remind him that after he is eighteen, she is not legally required to provide him a home.*

*Susan*

*Homesick*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My daughter Rita is in her freshman year at college and she's homesick. She calls every day, sometimes two or three times, often crying. She says she likes the other students and her classes, but she misses her dog, her room, her high school friends, and us. (We come last on her list.) My husband and I are so worried about her that if she doesn't call, I call her. I just can't wait to hear that she's okay. I've found that wherever I am and no matter what I am doing, I am listening for my phone to ring. I've even thought of telling her to drop out and come home and put us all out of our agony. But in my more rational and hopeful times, I'm not sure that's the right thing to do or that I am doing the right thing by calling. I'm so wrapped up in my mommy feelings that I'm not thinking straight. Can you straighten me out?

Meredith

Dear Mommy,

Yes, I can straighten you out. Unfortunately, I can't straighten your daughter out and she seems to be a mess. College freshmen who are away from home for the first time in their lives might have an adjustment problem, but they're old enough to survive.

If only there were no cell phones, like when I went to college, and one called home once a week because it was long distance and expensive, things would be different. Cell phones are one of the main reasons the ties don't get cut when kids go away. I know you're worried and I know nothing will take your mind off that worry. So here's the solution. Tell your daughter that you have heard her. Tell her you understand what she's feeling, but she has to stay where she is for at least another semester. Then if she wants, she can transfer to another school close to home. Tell her that there will be work involved because she'll have to apply to college again. She'll

have to get her transcripts and write all those essays. That alone may discourage her. Make sure she knows that if she leaves school and doesn't transfer, she'll go to work and not live at home. She'll have to take her dog with her.

The best thing that you could do right now is try to wean her. Try accepting her calls three times a day; then, ten days later, just two times; and then, another ten days later, only once a day. Don't call her more than a couple times a week. You can't wait to hear if she's okay, but I'm here to tell you she is okay. Millions of freshman have survived college and she will, too.

By the way, Tracey Ullman and I wrote a sketch for her Showtime program, *State of the Union*, that was exactly this situation. A college student who chose to go to school in the Northeast, and then hated it, calls her mother in sunny San Diego constantly and her conversation always begins with, "Mom, I am sooooo cold." She wants to come home. You are not alone.

Gail, who survived NYU

*Anxiety is catching. With each phone call, Meredith and Rita transmit separation anxiety back and forth. But Meredith has some insight into the situation. She is correct in assessing that the calling is making it worse. Both mother and daughter have to deal with the separation. Meredith needs to face her empty nest and begin to build a new life that's not dependent on her daughter. Rita needs to push herself to get over her homesickness by getting involved at school. Meredith should explain the problem and the solution to her daughter. They can set up a once-a-week check-in calling time when they talk about their new experiences. If Rita cannot manage without help, Meredith should suggest she make an appointment to see a counselor at her school's student health services.*

*Gail, personally I wouldn't mention to Rita that she can leave school. Of course it's always an option. But knowing she has that out will not help her tackle and master the task in front of her.*

Susan



*Nate's Money*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son Rex is a college junior. Lately he has been calling to say he's short of money. It happens once or twice a month. He didn't do this the first two years of school, so I'm wondering why his expenses have so dramatically increased. The first two times he asked, I just sent him a check, but now I'm not sure that I did the right thing. I don't want to compound the problem, whatever it is, by sending more money. I am told that you women know about adult children and money. I would appreciate your advice.

Nate

Dear Not Sure,

You've come to the right place. We do know about adult children and money and I'm glad you appreciate our advice. I entitled this "Nate's Money" because your money is yours, Nate. You have the right to know what all your son's purchases are about.

I hope my older son doesn't kill me for telling this story. When he was a college freshman, he got a new hobby . . . jumping out of planes. He didn't tell me about it. I found out from my friend's son, who squealed on him. I told my son that I had to know what he was writing checks for, and from that point on, he let me know how he was spending his money and there was no more jumping out of planes.

Before you send Rex another dime, you're going to have to insist that your son tell you what he's spending money on. Also, you're not going to take his word for it. You need receipts. I wasn't born to alarm you but you've got to realize that he may be spending money on drugs. It's not easy to hear this, but one of the signs that a child is doing drugs is his need for more money, especially if there's a dramatic increase.

I hope I'm wrong.

Gail, who's always looking at the worst possible scenario

*Clearly Rex's expenses have increased. The question is why. Does he need money for lab equipment, a poker stake, or, as you suggest, Gail, drugs? As Nate realizes, he should not just send a check. The burden should be on Rex to provide a detailed accounting of his expenses with a clear explanation for the increase in need. Then Nate can decide whether the budget change is one he wants to pay for.*

*Remember, your children are not independent if they are relying on you for money. And if you're investing money, you have the right to know what it's being used for.*

*Susan*

### *Pete's Payments*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son wrote me a letter. I knew when it arrived, he was in trouble. He never writes, at least not letters with fully spelled words. You probably guessed it. Pete ran his credit card bill up to ten thousand dollars! I can't believe it! I've been so proud that he hasn't asked me for money, but now I know why. And what dumb credit card company would give a twenty-year-old a ten-thousand-dollar credit limit? You don't have to answer that question. My real question is, do I pay off his credit card and then ask him to pay me back over time? The credit card company is charging astronomical interest, so Pete can only make the minimum payment, which means he'll never pay it off. This would be a one-time loan.

Stan

Dear I Can't Believe It,

First, I'm going to answer the question you told me I didn't have to answer. Credit card companies send credit cards to college students because they figure if their parents can afford to send them away to school, they can afford to pay their credit card bills. It's disgusting and harmful. Students have committed suicide over the bills they incurred.

Now to your real question. If you can afford to pay off his bill, do it. Then sit down with Pete and work out a very precise schedule of repayment. Tell him he's going to have to get a job during the school year as well as during the summer. Plus, he can cut down on his expenses, which will cut down on your expenses. He's just going to have to give up his lavish lifestyle, the one that got him into trouble in the first place. Ten thousand dollars has nothing to do with necessities. He must be into buying stereo equipment or worse.

I love that you said it would be a one-time loan, because it's not a good idea to lend money to your children. They somehow feel it's wrong of you to want the money back, especially if they have to sacrifice anything to pay you.

I almost forgot. Take the card back and cut it up in front of him. It'll feel good.

I'm sorry this happened to you, Stan—Gail

*Gail, there are two serious issues here. One is Pete's inability to budget and delay gratification. The second is his not facing problems. He had a problem when he owed several hundred dollars he couldn't pay.*

*I urge Stan to either send Pete to a competent financial person for review of the charges and an assessment of the problem or to do the analysis himself. After Stan has a report, he will know how Pete got into trouble. In any case, Pete needs strong and detailed counseling on fiscal responsibility and budgeting.*

*Since Stan has not said he can't afford to bail his son out, I assume that he has the money to pay the bill. Generally, I do not recommend giving loans to financially reckless children. So, if Stan decides to retire the debt, I suggest he make it a gift. Then he can require that Pete work during school and summers to contribute to his education as a way of being responsible for his credit card fiasco.*

Susan

*Eric's E-mail Mama*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son Eric and I e-mail or text two or three times a day at least. It was fun until I realized that Eric is spending way too much time on e-mail. He should be going to class and paying attention, studying, getting to know his classmates. And maybe it's not just me he's e-mailing. Maybe he's e-mailing everyone he knows, which means . . . I don't even want to think what it means. What can I do? I'm not there. I can't police him.

Janice

Well, Janice,

Thank you. You answered your own question. You aren't there and you can't police him. Why don't you say in your next e-mail to him that you hope and pray that he's not spending all his time online and that he's going to class and studying like he's supposed to? Sometimes when children realize they've been found out, they clean up their act. Eric just might be one of those kids.

If you are the only one he's e-mailing, that's another story. Then he's just one more child who has to be close to home no matter where he is. Instead of sending a million short messages to him, send one long one and do that only every few days. It might be important to keep telling him you love him.

Gail, who didn't even know about computers in college

*No, Janice can't police her son, but she can police herself. Janice should tell Eric that she will no longer instant-message and text with him because it is interfering with what Eric is at school for—to get an education, grow socially, and find a career path. She should make it clear that she expects him to meet those expectations.*

*It is true that Janice has no control over what Eric does with other texters. But when parents are seduced into behaving like adolescents, their children have no leadership to more mature behavior.*

*If Janice points Eric in a mature direction, Eric is more likely to go there.*

*Susan*

## *Returning Zach*

Dear Gail and Susan,

Almost every weekend, my son Zach comes home from college to do his laundry. Or, really, to have my wife do it, although she claims she's only helping. During the weekend Zach hangs out with a couple of high school buddies, then takes his clean laundry back to school. When I was in college, I didn't have whole weekends with no studying to do and I wanted to develop my college social life. What's up with Zach? Is this about laundry? And if it is, couldn't he be doing his laundry in the machines provided on campus? I did. I have a feeling my wife and I went wrong someplace.

Henry

Oh, Henry,

Your wife and you may have gone wrong, but the good thing is, you can immediately go right. If Zach absolutely needs to be home on the weekend, why don't you ask him if he'd like to go to a local college and live at home? He won't want to. He chose to go away to college in the first place.

I have an idea that would work, unless Zach has such an acute case of separation anxiety that he needs professional help. (I don't think that's the case, because he can stay away for most of the week. I think he has fear of doing laundry.) Next time he comes home, tie your wife to a chair and gag her. Give your son a roll of quarters and tell him to use the local laundromat.

I think it's important to mention that a lot of times, parents are afraid of losing their child's love or they're afraid of their child, period. They're scared to confront them. Your wife may

feel that she could never tell her son that he isn't welcome at home whenever he wants to come. She might worry that he might feel abandoned and that he would choose not to ever come home again. (Then she will feel abandoned.) All these fears lead to parents keeping quiet. However, when problems are handled in the right way, firmly but sweetly, they can get very good results. In this case, it would be something like, "We love you very much, which is why we feel you should be spending more time at college. College is a great experience and we feel you might be missing a lot of it by coming home every weekend. Of course we're happy to see you, but we would also be happy if you were having a good time at school on the weekends. So we're asking you to stay there and see for yourself." Or you could turn his room into a den.

Gail, who lived in a coed dorm and therefore wanted to stay at school on weekends

*Zach is avoiding growing up by going back to his old home, his old friends, and his old dependency on his mother. Gail, if our kids are not moving forward, they are moving backward. Not a good thing.*

*Parents have to be careful not to collude with this developmental resistance. It's all too easy to let our kids come home on weekends without thinking about what it really means. Henry should make clear to Zach that he needs to stay in college and not come home whenever he wants to, that he has to master college life. Mastery takes time, commitment, and dealing with frustration. Zach needs to stay on campus, make new friends, try new recreational activities, and find a laundromat. If Zach cannot master his new life, Henry should suggest he find a counselor at his school's student health services to help him.*

Susan

## *Facebook and Friends*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My daughter dropped me from her Facebook "friends." I feel hurt and rejected. Even though I didn't always like what she

posted, I never said a word to her, so why would she do this to me?

Alice

Open Your Eyes, Alice,

Do you think your daughter dropped you from her Facebook page because she decided she was spending too much time on the computer and she needed to study? Or . . . do you think your daughter is putting things on Facebook that she doesn't want you to see? I'm guessing it's the latter, but that's a good thing. She's becoming independent. Our children don't separate from us all at once. They do it little by little and, although you still feel a need to be attached electronically, she needs to feel free from those ties. The truth is, Facebook Friends means just that. There's no such thing as Facebook Friends and Mother.

You, Alice, feel hurt and rejected by your daughter. If you don't let go, your hurts and rejections are going to get worse. It feels as if she slammed the door in your face. She's going to close many more doors, some hard, some softly. You are going to have to accept all of these closings.

I love this question because this problem didn't even exist five years ago. I can't wait for the next electronic problem to come up. My daughter is twittering instead of studying.

Gail, whose sons one day will have to cut  
the electronic cord with their kids

*In my opinion, Gail, parents should be interested in but not involved in their children's college life. College should be the student's experience separate from the family.*

*Alice legitimately can expect her daughter to get an education, keep up her grades, develop herself socially, and plan a career. That's what Alice is paying for. Being a Facebook Friend is not Mom's right, nor should it be her expectation.*

*That being said, I agree with you, Gail. Alice's daughter has apparently matured since the time she invited her mother to be a*

*friend. She has decided she has the right to a life unavailable to her mother. Alice should not feel rejected. She should feel pleased about her daughter's growth.*

*Susan*

## *College and Condos*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My son Tommy will be a college sophomore. He lived in the dorms his freshman year, but this year he has to live off-campus. Since his school is in an expensive city, renting an apartment will cost me a pretty penny.

One of my friends at work suggested that I buy Tommy a two-bedroom condo. He'll have a place to live, and he can rent one of the rooms to a buddy. I can have an investment that will hopefully appreciate. It seems to me a financially smart thing to do. Surprisingly, Tommy is lukewarm about the idea, although he said he would go along with it if that's what I decide, since it's my money. What do you think?

Kenny

Kenny, Sweetheart,

If you are still calling yourself Kenny and your son Tommy, there's something wrong with you. Could it be that you don't want either of you to grow up? You say renting will cost you a pretty penny; buying a two-bedroom condo won't? Let me tell you about owning a condo and expecting to rent one of the rooms. When you don't have a renter, you'll have a fifty percent vacancy to fill. And if you do, I am sure that your tenants—your son and another college student—are going to keep the place perfectly clean and neat so you can resell it. I'm sure they won't wreck anything and that you won't have any replacement costs, even when they have seventy of their friends over to watch the Super Bowl.

Why don't you ask your son why he is lukewarm about the idea? Maybe it's because he was just planning on having a



place to stay rather than giving his father a big investment opportunity. Maybe he knows the fate of apartments that have college students for tenants. Maybe he is embarrassed by having a father who goes overboard. Maybe he wants to be called Tom.

It was lovely of you to write.

Gail, whose sons lived in a fraternity house

*Gail, you are brilliant to have noted that Dad calls himself "Kenny" and his son "Tommy." You have also put your manicured finger on one of the important issues related to the time of life called "going to college."*

*Every stage of life has its developmental tasks. So what are the tasks of the college years? College students have to make good decisions about what courses to take. They have to decide what to major in. They have to make a plan that leads not only to a degree but also to the ability to support themselves. They have to figure out how to manage practical things like laundry, meals, and checking accounts; how to study amid myriad distractions, including homesickness and no parents around to nag them; and how to cope with unlimited freedom. That's a lot to master. Kenny should encourage Tommy to focus on these things and not burden him with being a landlord/property manager.*

*In addition, college is the time to complete the separation process. Parents and children both need to stop trying to control each other. They need to stop being dependent on one another. College should be solely Tommy's experience.*

*I know that in some circles parents buy their college kids condos and rationalize that it's a good investment. Paying for college is a good investment in a child's future. Buying a kid a condo may make Dad money, but it is not a good investment in his child's growth.*

*Cutting the ties is hard for both parents and kids. I think that Tommy is lukewarm about the condo idea because he senses that he needs to make the necessary snip. Kenny should help his son choose the grown-up path by getting out of Tommy's way. Perhaps if Kenny does his job, Tommy will call himself Tom.*

Susan

## *My Son, the Degree Addict*

Dear Gail and Susan,

Jerry, my son, got a BA in psychology, but by the time he graduated, he knew it was not the right field for him. He had minored in history, which he liked a lot, so he went on to get a PhD in history with the idea that he would teach at a university. However, there aren't many jobs out there and for the last two years he has only been able to get temporary posts. Jerry thinks that he should get an MBA, because with his history degree and a graduate business degree, he would be very marketable to a company. Needless to say, he can't afford to pay the tuition, so he has asked us to pay it. What do you think?

Bob

Bob, Who's Soon to Be a Poor Man,

Hear me loud and clear. Your son will never get out of school. Next he will think that he would really do well if he got a degree in women's studies.

He sounds smart. Why aren't you? (He must get his IQ from his mother.) Truthfully, it takes more than intelligence to be successful. You have to have drive and the ability to see things through. Your son lacks those qualities. (He probably got that from his mother, too. Maybe he isn't even your kid.)

Tell him you are finished paying tuition for him. Being an academic is like being on heroin. It's an expensive addiction. Write when he gets work.

Gail, who has a BS

*We do not live in a utopia where Jerry can study whatever his heart desires and be rewarded with a job in the end. Before a college student chooses a field, he should make sure there are jobs to be had in it. Liking something is not reason enough to invest enormous sums of time and money, unless he calls it a hobby and has another source of income that comes from his real job.*

*Does Jerry really know that an MBA will make him more marketable? For what?*

*But that is not really Jerry's issue, is it? Gail, did you know that you don't end adolescence until you close doors? Jerry and his parents haven't. Apparently they don't even know that they should. Jerry seems to want to remain a dependent adolescent.*

*Jerry's parents should close the door on supporting more school. If Jerry is serious about joining the adult world, he will get a job. There are jobs that offer training and don't require any more degrees than he already has. If, years down the road, Jerry discovers that an MBA would enhance his chances for promotion, he can attend at night on his own dime.*

Susan

## *Rosalyn Is Dropping Out*

Dear Gail and Susan,

I never thought I would have this problem, so I am totally unprepared and don't know what to do. My eighteen-year-old daughter Rosalyn wants to marry a twenty-eight-year-old man and drop out of college. To say I'm very upset is an understatement.

Should I try to talk her out of it—if I even could? Should I talk to the guy? I'm afraid Rozzie is setting herself up for tough times. What if the marriage doesn't last? She will have no education and be unable to support herself.

Annette

Dear Mother of a Possible Dropout,

Eighteen-year-old girls are very romantic and fall deeply in love. They can't picture themselves at thirty or forty. All they know is that it feels really good to have someone want you forever. They fantasize about the wedding and being the center of attention in a long white gown. They don't think dropping out of school is a terrible thing. So, Annette, you're facing a battle that you probably won't win.

There is a bright side. If your daughter gets married young,

she'll have her children early, and then when they're in school, she can go back to school and get herself an education. I'm happy to report that when my son was twenty-two, he married a twenty-year-old woman who dropped out of school. Eighteen years and four children later, they're still married and my daughter-in-law just graduated from the University of Washington. Although statistics say otherwise, there are happy endings.

I think your husband should give you a nice piece of jewelry to wear to the wedding.

Gail, who's very familiar with  
this problem

*I assume Rosalyn's boyfriend is a good guy and that at twenty-eight has a job and can support her. Nothing in the letter makes me think otherwise.*

*Therefore, Annette can talk to the couple and offer her opinion that Rosalyn would be better served in the long run if she completed her degree. She can then ask why they have decided that Rosalyn should drop out, reminding them that it's possible to be in college and be married at the same time. Annette can even offer to continue paying for Rosalyn's education.*

*However, if they still don't agree that Rosalyn should stay in school, I hope that the young couple has an alternative plan that makes sense. Because Rosalyn is eighteen, Annette has no legal power to prevent her from marrying.*

Susan

## *Sorority Girl*

Dear Gail and Susan,

My daughter wants to join a college sorority. I think it will adversely affect her grades. Do I have the right to forbid her to pledge?

Leeza

Dear Wondering,

You cannot forbid your daughter to join a sorority. However, if it'll cost you extra, you can refuse to pay. Your daughter will be really pissed. You assume that a sorority will affect your daughter's grades. That's not necessarily true. Some sororities aim to have good grade-point averages. They even help each other study. She'll get a big sister who has already taken the courses she will be taking, and that can be helpful, too. Also, she'll have the feeling of belonging and the feeling of sisterhood.

Relax, Leeza. Sororities are not necessarily like the ones in stupid, disgusting movies.

Gail, who values sisterhood

*Usually sororities have grade requirements and exert peer pressure on their sisters to meet them. Living in a sorority house with a house parent and rules can be less distracting than living in an apartment. So I believe that Leeza is unnecessarily worried about her daughter and a sorority. However, to reassure herself, she can talk to the house parents of the sororities her daughter is interested in.*

*And as you say, Gail, Leeza can refuse to pay the extra expense of a sorority and require that her daughter get a job on campus in order to make up the difference.*

Susan

### *Leading Robbie Astray*

Dear Gail and Susan,

I happily sent my son Robbie off to college. But since he's gone, I have been worried about the kind of friends he will make. My wife and I always knew the kids he hung out with. We even knew most of their parents. But now we don't know how to vet his friends. They could do drugs, be flakes, lead Robbie astray. Do you have any suggestions for making sure our son's friends are good for him?

Angus

Dear Father of Robbie,

Personally, I think you're assuming that Robbie is a flake already. Did you not raise him carefully? If you didn't, he could be led astray. When our children are little, we can choose their friends for them because we drive them to their friends' houses. We can try to keep them away from bullies. We can refuse to drive them to places where they'll be unsupervised. When they get to high school, we have a good idea of who they're hanging out with. And, as you said, we might know their friends' parents. So for eighteen years you supposedly trained them to be around decent people. If he can be led astray, he's a weak person.

Gail, who trusted her  
kids' decisions

*Presumably, before we send our children to college, they have had lots of experience in judging new people and being discriminating about the friends they make. That's why we should allow our children to have experiences outside the family circle, such as going to camp, working as a bagger in a supermarket, or selling in a department store. College shouldn't be the first time our children meet peers their parents don't know. Then, while our kids are still living with us, we have time and opportunity to judge how they make decisions and help them if they get misled. By the time our children reach college, we want them to be able to deal competently in the larger world of unknown people.*

*My sense is that in the past, Angus has overly controlled his son's social life, which may have limited Robbie's own development and his ability to make good choices in friends. Now that Angus has no control, he is very anxious. If that's the case, he might discuss the situation with his son, fill in what Robbie hasn't yet been taught, offer to be a sounding board if Robbie needs it, but then finally let Robbie develop himself and his own social life.*

Susan

## Concerned

Dear Gail and Susan,

My wife and I are concerned about our daughter Sammy, a college freshman. We have heard hair-raising stories about campus binge drinking and drugs. So far as we know, Sammy didn't do any of that in high school, but the stress and peer pressure in college can be great. Is there anything we can do to make sure our daughter doesn't get caught up in this kind of destructive behavior?

Francis

Dear Concerned,

Parents tend to be concerned about their kids getting into drugs and drinking when they go away to school. That's normal. You're overly concerned or else you wouldn't have written to us.

Parents have to have that drinking-and-drugs conversation with their kids by the time they're twelve. And those discussions should be an ongoing thing. A really serious sit-down talk about the dangers of drugs and alcohol should take place right before the child leaves for school. She'll say she's heard it before. You say, "And you'll hear it again."

There's nothing more you can do at this point. You can't be there with her, watching her every move. Just look out for certain signs, such as an increase in the amount of cash she's using, her grades, her speech pattern, and what she does when she comes home for vacation.

Drugstores have in-home drug kits. If you suspect anything, use one. Francis, this may be the first time your daughter is away from home, but she has taken the values of home with her.

Gail, who, thankfully, was needlessly concerned

*If we never let our children make their own decisions, suffer the consequences of their mistakes, or cope with frustration when they*

*are living with us, then our children might be inclined to disastrously submit to peer pressure or follow a charismatic leader down a druggie path.*

*But if our kids have a chance to establish their own identities and to think for themselves, they will be less likely to collapse and make self-destructive choices under the stress of college.*

*In addition, as you say, Gail, by this time Sammy should know a lot about the dangers of drugs and binge drinking. She should also have good ways of coping with stress and frustration.*

*In any case, Francis can't control his daughter's college environment and her choices. Dad will have to wait and see and take appropriate action if Sammy gets into trouble.*

*Susan*