

# You're On Your Own

(BUT I'M HERE IF YOU NEED ME)

**MENTORING YOUR CHILD  
DURING THE  
COLLEGE YEARS**

Marjorie Savage

A FIRESIDE BOOK

Published by Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney

# “You Pierced *What?*”

*When Social Choices Clash with Family Values*

In early November, Sharon drove to campus to bring her daughter home for a weekend visit. When Carla came to the dorm lobby to meet her, Sharon had to look twice to recognize her, and she worked hard not to show her dismay. She had not seen Carla in two months, and she had no warning that her daughter had dyed her hair ink black with purple highlights. Worse, it was now chopped short on just one side, revealing a row of silver hoops lining her right ear. Carla was wearing a long black skirt that looked like it had seen years of wear, although it had never been part of her high school wardrobe. The cute, brightly colored parka Sharon had bought before Carla went to school had been replaced by a shapeless floor-length wool coat, and Sharon could track her daughter's footsteps by the clapping of her heavy, thick-soled boots as she dashed down the hall to say good-bye to friends.

The ride home wasn't at all what Sharon had been looking forward to. She had imagined a long, pleasant conversation about Carla's classes and campus life, but as soon as they got into the car, Carla announced she needed a nap. "I had two tests and a paper due today, so I didn't get much sleep the past couple of nights." Then she slumped down in the seat and closed her eyes.

When they arrived at home, Sharon fixed a quick dinner. As she offered Carla a taste of the pasta sauce, she spotted a round, gold stud piercing her daughter's tongue, and she flinched with disgust. All her questions came out in one loud burst of angry disapproval. "What have you done to yourself? Have you punctured every part of your body? These clothes—where did they come from? And that hair! Don't you have any self-respect?"

Although Carla's new look was a huge surprise to her mother, it didn't seem particularly dramatic to Carla. After the initial blowup, Carla reminded her mother that she began college with two piercings in each ear, and Sharon had signed the permission forms for those. Adding six more to one ear didn't seem like such a big issue.

During weekend trips to campus-area thrift shops with some friends, Carla had gradually built up a new collection of clothes. "And they hardly cost anything at all. You can get real bargains at thrift shops, you know." The hair was a Halloween weekend makeover, and she decided she liked it enough to keep it for a while. "It's hair. It grows out," she reminded her mother. She admitted that the tongue piercing might be significant, but compared to the people she lived with, it wasn't all that unusual. On her floor in the residence hall, Carla said, there were at least four kids with eyebrow piercings, "everyone has a pierced navel," and a couple of students had pierced lips. "Mom, some kids have piercings in body parts you wouldn't even think *could* be pierced. And don't worry about my tongue—after I freak out my high school friends, I'm taking the stud out and letting the hole grow over. It's kind of weird, feeling it in my mouth all the time."

#### NEW FORMS OF REBELLION

As you look at the crowd during Parents' Weekend, it's no longer a surprise to see mothers with an ankle tattoo or a small dia-

mond nose stud or fathers with pierced ears. During their own college years, parents who fit the Generation-X label rebelled against their own parents' standards by getting tattoos of a rose, a Chinese symbol, or a Celtic cross. Nose rings and navel piercings may have shocked college parents in the early 1980s, but a good many of today's parents helped their daughter select her first tattoo or took their son for his first ear piercing. Nevertheless, a college student's tattoo or body jewelry may still be a surprise and disappointment—not necessarily because the student had it done, but because he didn't call home first to talk it over.

Certainly, there are plenty of parents who would consider any body art or dramatic change in appearance to be a significant act of rebellion, but a poll of parents indicates that, for some, it's more a matter of nuance. They would be more upset if their child got a tattoo or piercing from a less-than-sterile shop, selected a piercing or tattoo that might interfere with a job search, or got "more piercings or tattoos than she already has." For others, an act of rebellion would run more along the lines of refusing to communicate with the family, smoking, drinking, doing drugs, or rejecting family values.

The current generation of students is less likely than their parents' peers to actively rebel against the family or society. Still, they think it's fun to try out new appearances, to use their body for artistic expression, or to experiment with an unusual hair color or makeup schemes. While any significant changes in appearance or attitude could be an indication of shifting values, different groups of friends, or even drug use or onset of a mental health condition, consider the big picture. Is your student still communicating with you? Is he doing well enough in school? Is she involved in activities and excited about college? If the answer to these questions is yes, just keep talking with your child—and keep in mind that you may not be so innocent yourself. As one mother noted, "I had a reunion last year with a bunch of my

college friends, and we all went home afterward with matching tattoos. Apparently peer pressure can affect you at any age."

### ADJUSTING WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES HOME

For many students, the first year of college is as much about experimentation as it is about education. In high school, students may have avoided anyone who seemed strange. Now, living alongside dozens of new people, they find the differences engaging. They decide that the star athlete who, a year ago, would have seemed so arrogant is actually a lot of fun, and the eccentric who once might have seemed so unapproachable has a wonderful, wry sense of humor.

In some ways, it's like junior high all over again—a chance to meet new people and try on different personas to see what fits. A student can adjust his image entirely from one day to the next, dressing in artsy black for a poetry slam on Tuesday evenings, wearing a business suit for an internship in town on weekday mornings, and painting his face in school colors for the game on Saturday afternoon. And in each transformation, he can still be himself and still be surrounded by supportive friends.

Major family issues crop up during the first visit home after a student goes to college, over winter break when the student is home for more than just a long weekend, and the summer following the freshman year. Both you and your student will have your own expectations of how the weekend or the vacation visit will go, and your ideas will conflict. You might have made plans to stop at a nice restaurant for dinner to break up the ride home, but when you get to the dorm, you see that your son and his roommate are just finishing off the last of a three-foot submarine sandwich. You have invited Grandma for dinner, but your daughter has made arrangements to go out with a friend from high school. "I absolutely have to talk to Angie. We haven't seen

each other in months. I promised I'd call her the minute I got to town."

You have been looking forward to having your child home again, but after a few days, you find yourself incredibly annoyed at her behavior. "She hasn't picked up a single dish, she doesn't have time to help with anything around the house, and she's completely self-absorbed. She acts like God's gift to the family. How did I raise such a spoiled princess?"

Meanwhile, your student is baffled by her emotions at being back home. The family is not like she remembered. Things feel different, because things *are* different. She notices that you seem to be closer to her younger sister than you used to be, and her brother is talking about neighbors she's never even heard of. Or you moved the big TV into your bedroom and the little TV into the kitchen, so if she wants to watch a program, she has to sit at the breakfast counter.

She refuses to revert to the teen rules of reporting where she's going and when she'll be home. You want her to fit back into the family; you don't have any intention of treating your child like a guest in her own house. She, however, wants you to convey that her visit home is special. "You said you missed me. I thought you'd be glad to have me back! I didn't know you just wanted somebody around to do the dishes for you." And you, meanwhile, don't understand why the only things she seems to appreciate about being home are the bathroom, the refrigerator, and the television remote.

For families that haven't seen their student in a while, the changes can seem abrupt and dramatic. It is hard to figure out how this person could have become so different so quickly, let alone understand that she may yet change back.

---

### **Avoiding the Mishaps of the Student Visit**

- If you will be picking up your student from school, clarify

what time you will arrive and what time you expect to start home.

- Talk to your student about how much he plans to bring home. You might be thinking it's just a brief visit, so he should be able to fit everything into a duffel bag. He might have saved up a month's worth of laundry, and he may be planning to bring home his laptop, sound system, game system, all his DVDs and CDs, not to mention all the chargers for all his electronics. "I can't live without this stuff for the whole four days of Thanksgiving break!"
- Allow some time for helping your child pack the car, as well as some extra time for students to say their good-byes.
- Since the days leading up to school vacations are usually hectic, don't be surprised if your child sleeps all the way home. You'll seem like the best parent ever if you bring along a blanket and pillow for the car. Once she gets home, she might sleep more than seems normal. There are valid reasons why students spend long hours in bed: they are exhausted by dorm life and exams; it feels comfortingly safe to be back in their own bed, in the security of their home and family, and retreating to bed is a way to gradually work back into the rhythms and pace of being home.
- Talk in advance about family obligations and how you will handle use of the car, curfews, and information sharing. Explain the reasoning behind your rules. Many parents find it's easier to say when they expect their car home rather than when they expect their child home.
- Discuss your expectations regarding doing your child's laundry, what daily household chores you want help with, and any family or holiday plans. If you ask what plans your student is making, explain that you want to know so that you don't make arrangements that will conflict with his schedule.

- Recognize that some of his disagreeable behaviors are not a rejection of you and your values, but they serve as a way for him to communicate his independence.
- 

### ADJUSTING WHEN YOUR STUDENT COMMUTES

If your student lives at home and commutes to school, the evolution is no less troubling for commuter families—it may be even more difficult because the whole family will be living with the adjustments on a daily basis.

Like Carla, Janet's son took to buying clothes at thrift shops during his first few months at college. Instead of his former standard outfit of jeans and a sweater, he was now wearing dark, turtleneck shirts and black pants. One weekend, he hauled several boxes of his old clothes down to the basement.

"I don't have room for these clothes," he said. "I'm moving my bookshelves into my closet. I found a couch at a yard sale, and I'm putting it in my room. I need my own space to study."

It wasn't so much the clothes and the redecorating that bothered Janet. Her son had been a fairly traditional high school student—participating on the track and cross-country teams, involved for two years with the debate club, playing trumpet in the school band. Now it seemed like he had no interest in sports, and all he talked about were music and movies. When she heard him on the phone with his friends, the conversations were all about musicians and film directors. He began coming and going at odd hours.

One night she wasn't sure whether he had even come home. When he showed up for dinner the following evening, Janet confronted him. "You can't stay out until all hours like this! This is still my house, and as long as you live here, you have to follow a few rules."

"Mom, I'm an adult," he said. "Most kids my age don't see



their parents from one holiday to the next. You can trust me. I don't want to have to keep you posted all the time."

It's not living away from home that changes college students. All their lives, children gradually move away from their parents. College coincides with the time in a child's life when he is taking bigger and bolder steps on his own. A young adult's separation from his family is a natural and necessary step in the growing-up process.

While it's true that you have the right to establish the rules in your own home, you also need to recognize your child's increasing maturity and all the obligations in his life. A student's social commitments are interwoven with work and school. Study groups, going out with friends, and dating are all part of the package.

When your student lives at home, you expect to rely on him for a few basic family responsibilities. A family dinner on Sunday seems to you like a tradition, not an imposition. From your student's standpoint, it feels like one more obligation in an already overplanned schedule. Nevertheless, while you must sometimes accept the demands on your student's schedule, you can also request some family participation and basic respect.

## CULTURE CLASH

Education is not only about gathering facts and theories. It's also about integrating lessons into life. Students are opening their eyes and their minds to the ideas and lifestyles of the friends they're meeting, the professors they're hearing, and the authors they're reading. Inevitably, they will begin to see their own experiences and their family's values in new ways.

The beliefs and practices that they have always taken for granted are challenged during the college years. Whether the doubts students express are about the religion they were brought

up in, the family's politics, or their parents' economic status, parents can hardly help but feel threatened. It is painful to have your child question or challenge your beliefs, and it is frustrating to see her take on behaviors you had not expected.

Scott Slattery, a counselor and psychologist at the University of Minnesota, suggests that parents treat their suddenly unfamiliar student as they would a foreign exchange student.

"If you had a student visiting from Eastern Europe or northern Africa, and he wore strange clothes or had an unusual hairstyle, you probably wouldn't be offended," Scott says. "You might think it was all quite interesting. You would probably ask about some of his habits or appearances."

Scott suggests that parents try the same approach with their student. "Talk about what you're noticing and ask your child, 'Is it common where you live to sleep during the day and stay up all night?' 'Do a lot of people have tattoos like that?' 'Does the symbol on your necklace have a particular meaning?'"

Just as you would probably explain your culture and your family traditions to an exchange student, Scott says, you can remind your son or daughter of the way things are in your household.

"Tell them, 'Here, we all go to bed before midnight. You'll find it's a lot easier to sleep between eleven or twelve at night and seven in the morning, because that's when we sleep. And since everyone here helps with chores, we'd appreciate it if you would take care of the breakfast dishes sometime before noon so the kitchen will be clean when we make lunch.'"

College students are not slow-witted. They'll pick up on the sarcasm, but they'll also appreciate that you are asking about their appearance or reminding them of family routines rather than either accusing them of doing something wrong or stoically pretending that nothing has changed.

Students do change over the course of their college years. They are going through a process of confronting their past, pres-

ent, and future. They are questioning who they are, testing new directions, doubting their abilities, and discovering impressive qualities in themselves. All young adults examine their self-image, and most will make at least some changes based on what they are learning about themselves.

---

### The Five *Ws* of the College Years

Throughout college, but especially during the first year or two, students are asking questions that families find uncomfortable. As hard as it may be for you, this is work your child must do. Students are looking for the answers to the Five *Ws*: Who, Where, What, When, and Why.

- **Who am I?** Students are engaged in the normal, but painful, process of separating the self from the family. During the college years, it is not unusual to try out different behaviors and beliefs and examine the values they were raised with. Questioning is part of the process of assimilation that must occur for their values to become embedded, to make the change from what they've always been told to what they truly believe.
- **Where do I belong?** College students start to think about how their family's social position, culture, and income influenced their upbringing. They wonder how these realities can affect their own position in the future and what they can do to change their destiny.
- **What will I do with my life?** Students recognize that by the time they leave college, they will want a sense of what comes next. Some students come to college with a clear and unbending vision of their future, but most need to figure out what it means to apply their values through their work and actions.

- **When does it all begin?** When do I grow up? Students express a constant desire for whatever comes next—the next semester, the next stage in a relationship, or the next phase of life. They are waiting for the moment when everything finally will feel complete, when people will consider them as adults at last. That was supposed to happen when they got to college, but now they find that college is just more preparation.
- **Why?** The three-year-old's constant "why" reemerges in college. Students will pick apart a relationship, a plan, or their past and analyze it almost to the point of obsession. This is part of the growth process, and it is connected to the fear of making a mistake with their newfound responsibilities. They are seeing old, familiar ideas in brand new ways, which can be disquieting. They struggle with the idea that life is not just black and white, right or wrong, but that there are many shades of gray, along with primary colors, pastels, and all kinds of tints and hues.

---

Each time your student comes home, and especially during the first year, you will need to figure out how to fit your family back together again. It can be a slow, grating challenge as you try out the old roles and realize they no longer seem comfortable. Then again, rather than a slow adjustment phase, you may run head-first into a major collision with your newly independent child. More than one family has seen their student come home over spring break and in short order accuse his parents of hypocrisy.

"You send a check to the Sierra Club every year, and you claim to be such an environmentalist, so why do you have to drive that SUV around town? You seem to think that everyone else in the world should conserve energy, but you get to pollute the whole valley."

As uncomfortable as it is to have your child challenge your beliefs and behaviors, your explanation is important to him. In this case, your student is probably not saying you should stop sending that check to the Sierra Club, nor should you get rid of the car. He probably likes driving it as much as you do, but he may genuinely want to know how you have managed to put these seemingly disparate behaviors together. Maybe you respond by admitting that you wanted a truck all your life, but you could never have one because you needed a family vehicle; your son might come to see that having this midsize SUV is a compromise that allows you to quietly fulfill your long-held fantasy without getting a full-size, two-seater pickup. Or you may acknowledge that you always worried about your children's safety in your previous car, and in this one, you feel like your family is more protected; this gives your son a glimpse of his parents' priorities. He still may disagree with your rationale, but it helps to see how you reach your decisions.

You may feel like your child is rebelling against everything you ever taught her. You probably won't understand where his new ideas came from and how your child reached his decisions. Even though your child is questioning the way she was raised or the things you believe in most deeply, she has heard your lessons throughout her life, and she is taking your words into consideration. She will not completely reject out of hand everything she's ever learned.

Those of us who work on campus frequently hear students say, "My parents think . . ." or "My mom says . . ." or "In my family, we always . . ." Students know their parents' opinions, and they care what their family thinks. The student who lights up her first cigarette is thinking, if not saying, "My dad would kill me if he knew I was smoking."

Every college student makes choices his parents would criticize. Nonetheless, you can trust that by the time your child

reaches eighteen, he or she knows what you believe. Your words will pass through his mind as he makes his decisions. And even if family values drop out of sight for a while, they usually reappear by graduation.

#### WHO IS THIS KID, AND WHAT DID THEY DO WITH MY REAL CHILD?

When parents leave their students at college, one of their great fears is that their child will change *too* much. They expect their child to become more mature, to grow in intellect, to gain a focus on life. It can be hard, though, to think of all those changes happening when you are not around to watch the progress.

Throughout high school, Miguel had been cynical about athletics and most of the typical after-school organizations. He and his friends scorned the student council members and class officers; anything resembling school spirit irritated him. His own extracurricular activities revolved around drama club, debate, and the school play.

At college, though, his outlook changed dramatically. At his small liberal arts college, he joined the newspaper staff, volunteered to give tours for the admissions office, and signed up for training to become an orientation leader. As a sophomore, he was elected to the student assembly, and the next year he ran for student body president. When his parents visited him on campus, he seemed to be admired by everyone, and he was obviously flourishing.

College can bring on a complete personality reversal. Miguel's parents were impressed with all the growth they saw in him, but they couldn't help but wish they had been a part of it. It almost felt like they might have been the reason he was so cynical all those years; as soon as he moved away from home, he became energized and excited. It was not his family that made the dif-

ference, though. In the small-school atmosphere of Miguel's college campus—rather than the huge and highly programmed high school he had attended—he saw that his efforts could make a genuine difference.

Sometimes the changes go the other way. Students can get lost in the freedom of their new way of life. Instructors don't take attendance, and if students don't turn in a paper, no one asks for it. There are few rules, and with a bit of ingenuity, most of them can be broken. And every college student has lapses of judgment. Your daughter gives a hundred dollars to a stranger because he has a sad story; your son loses his backpack; your daughter leaves the apartment unlocked, and her violin is stolen.

The college years are a staging ground for adulthood. In most cases, mistakes are made within the relative safety of a supportive environment, and there are people around to help students pick up the pieces. Not every problem is easily remedied, however—the unplanned pregnancy, the run-in with the police after a night of drinking, or the inappropriate behavior that leads to a charge of sexual assault.

Sometimes it's even hard to understand what rules were broken. Once again, technology adds both to life's comforts and discomforts. Students are being sanctioned for online stalking and plagiarism, and they're sued for online theft. What seems like an innocent Internet search for a couple of new songs turns into illegal downloading, and those music tracks come with a loss of Internet access.

When students make mistakes, their reaction may be to give up and drop out of school rather than work to find a solution. Parents, meanwhile, feel the need to step in and fix the problem. Colleges routinely hear pleas from parents saying that "He's only a kid! Can't you let this go?" Whether it's underage drinking, plagiarism, or lighting a Dumpster on fire after a basketball vic-

tory, there are families asking for leniency, just this once and just for their child.

People over the age of eighteen are adults who are responsible for their actions, and they must be prepared to face the consequences when they make mistakes. This is part of the maturing process. Colleges, like society, enact rules and policies in order to ensure a safe and fair community for everyone who lives, works, and studies on campus.

When a student makes a significant mistake or breaks the rules, family members have to decide if they can help—and realistically, whether they even should help. It may be the hardest thing you've ever done to tell your student you cannot intervene, and you will not fix the mess he's in. It may also be the best thing you can do. When students think their parents will continue to protect them from the consequences of their behaviors, they do not feel a need to grow up and accept responsibility. Facing the outcome of a serious mistake is a painful process, but facing it is better than doing nothing—and much better than repeating the mistake.

Some eighteen- to twenty-year-olds simply do not belong in college. If that sounds like your son or daughter, you will want to work with your child to think about what comes next. You don't have to, and should not, support a college education if your student is not going to take advantage of it. Most colleges are willing to defer enrollment if a student decides to take a break for a semester or two. Advisers and counselors will often encourage a student who is having academic problems to take some time off. Work or travel experiences can help students identify interests or decide on a major. If a year off helps a student mature, focus, and develop a commitment to education, it's time well spent.

Nearly every student makes at least some changes during the years between age eighteen and twenty-two. As the years pass, though, that stranger begins to look more and more familiar.



The daughter who blasted her religious training usually ends up getting married in the church where she received her first Communion or the synagogue where she had her Bat Mitzvah. The son who questioned his family's politics ends up voting for the same candidate as his father. Children call home to ask for their grandmother's holiday recipes, and eventually they want all those books, toys, and clothes they stuffed into the attic years ago.

However, the turnaround doesn't happen quickly, and it usually doesn't yield a totally satisfying outcome. Your children will be different from you, just as you are different from your parents. You probably rejected some of your own parents' practices and values, and few parents are entirely pleased with all of their children's choices.

You're still going to enjoy watching them as they start their careers and move on with their lives. In the meantime, focus on the positive. Most parents, when they stop and think about the differences they've seen since their child started college, say that he or she is more independent and mature, more intelligent, and more appreciative of home and family.

#### QUICK TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- Before your parents come to campus for family weekend or before you go home for a visit, take a quick assessment: What has changed about you since the last time your family saw you? Do you look different? Are you dressing differently? Do you have new habits or have you accepted a new core belief that your family is not expecting? Give them a call and let them know in advance. It's a challenge for parents when they're dishing up the Saturday-night stew to hear their son announce, "I'm a vegetarian. I won't eat that stuff." You'll help your family adjust, and while you still may

face some conflict, it's likely to be milder than if they had no warning.

- Expect and respect new family patterns. You have changed since you left home; don't be surprised if your family has, too. With you gone, maybe your parents decided to change their diet, adopted a cat, or started going to the gym every night. If there's something that really bothers you, mention it, but don't consider their changes as a personal insult. Look for the benefits and tell them when you notice something you like. They'll be amazed by your maturity.
- If you have a problem—you've overdrawn your debit account, someone stole your cell phone, or you're failing chemistry—tell your parents. Remember when you were in high school and they told you, "If you get in trouble, I'd rather hear about it from you than from someone else"? They still feel that way.
- If there's a big problem, put yourself in their care. You don't need to come up with the perfect way to bring up the topic: Just say, "Mom, Dad, I need to tell you . . ." (And it doesn't hurt to tell them, "I'm scared.")