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On Parenting

When your baby leaves for college

By Melissa T. Shultz July 7 at 1:00 PM



The author's son, Nick, the author and his grandmother. (Courtesy of the author)

Kids move out emotionally at least a year before they do physically. And it's important to remember that it's mostly a one-sided thing — we're the ones who are left behind with memories of them in every corner. As far as leaving us is concerned, in their minds, we're *always* here — they know where to find us. Drop-off stories run the gamut. With my oldest son, I made the mistake of turning around and looking back when we said goodbye. I do not advise this.

Broadcast journalist and mom of three Jane Pauley was surprised to find that taking her twin son and daughter to college was different than she expected. "It was an adventure we shared right up to the moment it was clear that my part of the adventure stopped and theirs kept going. We deposited our son first and his twin sister a week later. I was obsessed with organizing his stuff. My son's T-shirts were left folded and organized by prints and solids and colors. I'd never done this at home. I was under his desk untangling electronic cords and attaching twist ties to keep them neat when I sensed he and his new roommate silently agreed the time had come for Mom to go. It was so obvious the kids were eager for us to leave, I left without anxiety. My daughter told me something a year before that she'd learned in high school psychology: 'The empty-nest syndrome lasts about a week.' We still had their little brother and his friends at home, so it was not exactly an empty nest yet. Still, it was a lot easier than it was made out to be."

Georgette Adrienne Lopez, mother of twin sons and a lawyer and producer who works in the television industry, had just finished moving the second of her boys into his freshman dorm when she began to drive away. As she looked into her rear-view mirror, she saw him waving goodbye, teary-eyed and holding a small box containing some of his things from home. For Lopez, a divorcee who took care of most of her sons' upbringing, seeing him standing there, his image getting smaller and smaller until it disappeared altogether, let unleash a flood of emotions. "That was it," she says. "I was a hot mess."

Until that moment, Lopez had considered herself an optimist, even after she lost her full-time





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job several years before. “I figured if I just kept going, I didn’t have to focus on it.” As the reality of the looming empty nest began to set in, Lopez knew she needed to face some truths — chiefly, that she had been “faking the funk” for many years, and that for herself and her sons, she needed to focus on the open road that lay ahead.

Beverly Beckham, mom of three and Boston Globe correspondent whose popular essay “[I Was the Sun, and the Kids Were My Planets](#)” has run every year since it was first published in August 2006, says she and her husband, along with their oldest daughter, who had already graduated from college, drove their youngest to school for her freshman year. When they arrived, there were signs on the RA’s door for free condoms, and then she witnessed a drug deal before having to leave her daughter in her dorm. “I cried all the way home,” she says. “My 23-year-old daughter was in the back seat pretending to be a princess kidnapped by deranged people — she was trying to make me laugh.” Beckham says it seems like she must have cried for weeks, and then one day, her daughter called and told her how unhappy she was at school, and everything changed. “I wanted her to be okay,” says Beckham.

Over time and with lots of conversation, they both adjusted to their new lives. At some point, she says, “You finally just get it, and then, that all ends.”

When the reality that your 18 years of active parenting are up, take a breath and the advice of child, adolescent and family psychologist Jennifer Hartstein: “Remind yourself of all the things you’ve done to prepare your teen for this big day and that it is part of life and needs to happen. Although it may feel sad, it’s important that your child move into the world.” What kids need now is not instructions about how to do everything right, but the resourcefulness and resilience to cope with things when they go wrong. And that includes having parents to call on when they need advice.

I wrote to my youngest son when he left for school. It seemed more natural to our relationship than trying to say it all as we parted ways. And yes, I did offer some advice, though it was nothing he hadn’t heard before. I wanted to remind him of his worth, his talents, that perfection is not the goal — the journey is — and that no matter what, I’d be here for him:

Wait just a minute.

You don’t like it when I’m sentimental, but how can I not be today? You’re heading off to college, and there are a few things I’ve got to say.

You were born an original and inspired me to see the world anew. Not through the prism of pink that I had known, but through the eyes of a boy who delighted in stories about superheroes and tales of the impossible. A boy who found beauty in bugs and things that go bump in the night; a boy who swung from the limbs of a tree and made magic swords from the branches it dropped and slew dragons and monsters and bad guys.

You’re a boy after my own heart.

There’s no one more fun to share a meal with or more willing to help make homemade biscuits at midnight, then devour them with apricot jam.

And when you got sick that cruel year, it was me who got mad at the world, not you. Then, just when it seemed the illness would never end, it did ... though admittedly, we were never quite the same. Now there’s a shadow that lurks behind us.

Movies are your future. You told me so when you were 9 years old. And now here we are, packing up your suitcases so you can go away and learn how to make them the way you dream them.

While you’re away, be the friend you’d like to have. Go on adventures, but promise you’ll pause first to consider the what-ifs. Be spontaneous, but believe me when I say that some things cannot be undone. Choices are exactly that — choices — and dares are designed by bullies, not friends.

We tried to instill the right values in you. Hone them, and value your impact on others and the

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world at large. What do you stand for? Actions have repercussions, and people will judge you less sympathetically now that you're on your own.

Don't expect to do everything right, right from the start. Anyone who has ever accomplished anything made mistakes — but they learned from them. Learning is a process, and this is your time to ask questions and seek answers, to make the most of the gifts you've been given and the opportunities you've been granted.

The clothes you laid out are ready to go. I added a few things — more hats and gloves for the winter, and an extra blanket. Linens and towels, Band-Aids and balms. Your favorite books and comics. All pieces of your home for your new home.

There's one more thing: Take my love with you.

Long after I'm gone, it will be there for you.

This essay is adapted from the book [“From Mom to Me Again: How I Survived My First Empty-Nest Year and Reinvented the Rest of My Life”](#) by Melissa T. Shultz. Shultz, born and raised in Washington D.C., is the acquisitions editor for [Jim Donovan Literary](#). She's written about health and parenting for many publications. You can follow her on Twitter [@MelissaTShultz](#) and see more of her work at [Sisterhood of Mothers](#).

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