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What to Expect as Children Transition to Young Adults

Melissa Ponce-Rodas

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What to Expect as Children Transition to Young Adults



▲ MELISSA PONCE-RODAS

COLLEGE STUDENTS AND FAMILY LIFE AREN'T TERMS THAT ARE USUALLY USED TOGETHER. IN THE U.S., MANY OFTEN SEE COLLEGE AS A TIME OF INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND INDEPENDENCE FROM ONE'S IMMEDIATE FAMILY.

However, after more than 15 years of teaching college students, I can attest that this is one of the most common, non-academic conversations I have with my students. The reason conversations about family happen so often is because when a student goes to college the entire family system changes, yet most families aren't discussing this with each other. But having this opportunity to explore these issues with students is one of the things I love about my job. We usually end up with more questions than answers but that leaves them with some "things to think about" with their family members. Here are a few of the most common issues that arise, and hopefully, they can stir some conversations in your own homes, families or churches as this new school year begins.

The first thing to note is that the structure of the family has changed. Whether formalized or not, everyone plays a role in each family. Now that the college student is not living at home most of the time, the people who remain must adapt to a new structure (e.g., who is the oldest child now), as does the college student in a new environment. But what happens when the student returns for break? If we don't realize these changes are happening, and we don't talk about them, they are likely to cause some concerns. So, start the conversations and make some plans to adjust. And if at first you don't succeed, try again!

Family roles also change during this time. This includes responsibilities at home (who takes the dog

for a walk) and responsibilities at college. For students, there may be a different curfew, no one to ask for permission to go out, no one to help with laundry or preparing meals, but a need to work more and pay bills. With these changes, what happens when they return home for vacations? Do they ask permission for everything? Are they expected at the dinner table every night? Not only are the students changing and learning, but so are the parents, siblings and maybe even extended family members. Again, this change is normal and healthy, but we need to acknowledge it and talk about it.

Being proactive about change in families helps everyone to better understand family life and many of the unwritten rules that come with it. When we find the structures and patterns that work for us (note that I didn't give answers to the questions I raised above because they will vary and there is no "right" answer for everyone), our families are healthier and stronger. The one constant in life is change, but Ecclesiastes reminds us that, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." Welcome to a new season, and our prayer is that it is one of joy and blessings! ■

Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband, Segundo, have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolve around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.

