

Parents' expectations, styles can harm college students' self-esteem

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Mom and Dad are going to flip out over my 3.3 GPA and failure to land a top internship. Such anxieties, common among college students, can harm self-esteem and make it more difficult to adjust to school. But a new University of Central Florida study has found that students' anxieties often are based on exaggerated perceptions of what their parents expect.

The problem, UCF psychologist Kimberly Renk says, is that many parents and students hold different perceptions of what the parents' expectations are. Students often are trying to meet goals far tougher than the ideals their parents have in mind.

The study, which involved surveys of 174 students and 230 of their parents, is published online in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence and is scheduled for the September edition.

A separate study by Renk -- published this summer in the Journal of Family Issues -- is among the first to examine how parenting styles remain a strong influence on how students adjust to college. Students reported making smoother transitions to college if they have at least one parent whose style combines warmth, a demanding nature and democracy -- the same combination that is best for young children.

Renk, the mother of a kindergartner and an infant, directs UCF's Understanding Children and Families laboratory, which seeks to better the lives of children and their families through research, clinical work

and community service.

She said parents' influences on college students may be growing at a time when cell phones and other technology make it easier for students to stay connected with and rely on their parents.

"Many people still assume that parenting ends when a child turns 18, but in our culture today, there is a longer extension of adolescence," Renk said. "Adulthood is starting later."

Renk and then-UCF doctoral student Allison Kanter Agliata began their study of parental expectations by surveying 174 freshmen and sophomores. With the students' permission, they then collected 138 surveys from mothers and 92 from fathers. Questions focused on perceptions of personal maturity, academic achievement and dating. Other questions covered how well parents and students thought they communicate with each other.

While most students were meeting or exceeding their parents' expectations, many still thought they were falling short, and those students reported lower self-worth and more trouble adjusting to college.

In light of that finding, Renk recommends that schools and universities teach assertive communication skills to parents and students to help them avoid unnecessary stress about expectations.

In the second study, Renk and then-doctoral student Cliff McKinney found that students who perceive that they have at least one authoritative parent – someone whose style combines warmth, a demanding nature and democracy – adjust better to college than students whose parenting styles are too authoritarian, permissive or neglectful.

Several studies by Renk and other researchers have shown the benefits

of authoritative parenting for younger children.

For parents who may be concerned that they have been too permissive or too authoritarian, it's not too late to change, Renk said. She added that it takes time for parents to change their styles and that they should not give up if they fail at first.

"Everything is not lost if you are the parent of a college student and trying to do a better job," she said. "If you are open and ready to listen to what they have to say, that will help you build a stronger relationship."

Source: University of Central Florida

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