

And Then There Were Three: Helping Siblings through the College Transition



You never thought the day would come that your children who argued over clothes, divided their shared room down the middle with masking tape, and avoided each other at school would actually be sad to say good-bye. As your child prepares to leave for college, saying good-bye is equally difficult for those leaving and those being left behind, even siblings. Sibling relationships can be enduring, and a sense of loss can be felt when an older sibling heads off to college.

Staying Connected

Whether a sibling is feeling lonely or confused about their new perceived role in the family, there are a variety of ways that parents can help those children at home stay connected with an older sibling at college.

- Plan family gatherings
 - Plan** a dinner out for just family when the college student comes home to visit.
 - Explore** a new city by meeting halfway between home and college for a day.
 - Have** the younger sibling(s) and college sibling(s) collaboratively plan a family weekend getaway.
- Virtual connection
 - Plan** weekly phone calls for younger siblings to talk with their older sibling.
 - Provide** access to email for siblings back home.
 - Help** a sibling prepare a college care package.
 - Snail** mail is always fun to get, so encourage siblings to write each other regularly.
- Plan a campus visit: **Family Weekend, Sibling Weekend, Homecoming, Athletic Events**

Opportunities to Reconnect with Siblings Still at Home

Multiple changes are happening for the college sibling, and similarly the siblings left behind are experiencing change in a newly constructed family unit. Consider how you can:

Anticipate the new “family order”

- The middle child** or younger child will now take on the role of the oldest in the family.
- Resources** such as transportation, bedroom space, computer, etc. may need to be reallocated appro-

priately amongst those siblings still at home.

This is the time to give special attention and support to the siblings still at home.

Be careful not to send a “guilt trip”

It is easy to try to “make” an older sibling spend time with a younger sibling, but allowing the reconnection to happen naturally will lead to a long-term renewed relationship.

Be careful not to make a returning student feel guilty for wanting to spend time with friends, bringing new college friends home, or needing alone time, rather than spending time with family.

Family Reconfiguration When College Student Arrives Home

A homecoming will require adjustments.

- Younger siblings experience mixed emotions and may need support from parents if they feel that a returning college student is monopolizing family time and resources.
- Younger siblings may be confused by perceived and real changes in their college sibling. Once able to talk about everything and anything, siblings have led different lives over the past few months and may need to become re-acquainted.
- The middle or youngest sibling has become comfortable with his role as the “oldest” the past few months, and will need to adjust to the adapted family hierarchy once again.

Family Transition Tip

Once a sibling leaves for college, give siblings still at home a journal where they can write feelings, fears, and questions about missing their sibling. Use the journal as an opportunity to discuss this family transition with the sibling left behind.

Family Transition Tip

Spend family time talking about living space and how space might be reallocated BEFORE your student leaves, so he is not surprised when he arrives home and finds his bedroom is now occupied by a sibling or has been made into a den.