

An Open Letter to DSS Providers

(subtitle - Confessions of a Helicopter Mom?)

In just two weeks, I move my daughter into the dormitory. How did this happen? How did we get here?

I have been reading a book that someone recommended to me called *Letting Go*. It is written for parents who are preparing to send their offspring off the college. Notice that I did not say “preparing to send their children” NOR “preparing to send their students.” I know my kid is no longer a “child,” but she will always be MY child. And she isn't MY student - she is YOUR student (relax... not you, personally! She - and I -- will not be showing up on your doorstep in two weeks!).

I am finding the book most helpful in letting me know that my experience/feelings/fears are actually pretty run-of-the-mill. I used to teach a class for graduate students entitled “Interviewing and Counseling Parents of Children with Disabilities.” Recently, I have been reflecting quite a bit on one of the most important insights I tried to convey to my students. Parents of kids with disabilities have a hard time sorting out whether the difficulties they are encountering are a function of the disability or a function of parenting. I am finding that making the distinction doesn't get any easier as my daughter moves along. Every time we approach a new milestone (and leaving for college is certainly a boulder-sized milestone!), there are lots of concerns, lots of issues to be discussed, and lots of frenzied activity. Being in the middle of it makes it HARDER to sort out, not easier. How much is about my only kid leaving home? How much is about my kid-with-a-disability leaving home?

I am telling you this for two reasons. First, it strikes me that it is conceivable that DSS providers may fall into the same trap when they interact with parents. Can you always separate what is about the disability from what is about moving into unfamiliar territory - fears that any parent would express but that are amplified/altered by the presence of a disability? “Helicopter parents” are a concern for your colleagues from the Dean of Students to the campus cops. There is no need to take it personally when you are confronted with a parent who stubbornly suggests an ongoing level of involvement (for themselves or for you!) with the student with a disability that you know to be inappropriate.

More to the point, I suppose, my message today is that if, in your role as DSS provider, you find your interactions with parents like me to be... um... trying (!), PLEASE BE PATIENT WITH US. This process of transition, of letting go, of learning new rules, experiencing new settings - you go through this every year and you go through it with multiple students every year. For us parents, this is the first time. Even if it is a parent who has sent older kids off to school successfully, letting go of THIS kid with a disability is a new and different experience - BECAUSE of that disability. I am not asking DSS providers to lose focus on the student end of things because you are busy hand-holding the parents. The students are, and should be, your primary concern. I am just hoping to remind you that while parents can be a great pain and distraction to what is important for you (and the student), they may BE in pain and be more than a little distracted. Please be gentle.

Still Proud and (Still) Terrified Mom
Jane Jarrow