

# The Authenticity of Parent-Student Connections

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The challenges of navigating one's way through the landscape of college life can be quite pronounced. With rigorous classes, late night study sessions, assignment deadlines, term papers, midterm and final examinations, and the competition for grades, life for a student member of any campus community can be extremely hectic to say the least. Those more academic related stressors that characterize a student's experience are also compounded by the dynamics of social life and relationship drama which seem to weigh heavily upon the minds of many of our 17-22 year olds. Add to that mix an assortment of social engagements and fellowship (i.e. "hang out") opportunities which consume many more hours than some can afford to spare, and you have the recipe for a potentially stressed out student.

Within the context of these hallowed halls of academia rest a particular set of personal idiosyncrasies which tend to characterize the behaviors of your sons and daughters, particularly when they are under moderate to severe levels of stress. Included on this list are attitudes and behaviors such as quick "hi-byes"; responses of "fine" or "chill'in" or "it's all good" to questions of how one is doing; and a general posture of connecting with their fellow students in ways that resemble marbles in a pin ball machine careening off of one another as they rapidly move toward their next destination with little more than a fleeting glance. Under these conditions, students sometimes fail to connect with their academic counterparts in ways that provide much visible support, assurance, nurturance, or comfort.

Well, as parents of these students, you cannot afford to engage in like behaviors where checking in with your academic darlings mirrors what might be characterized as "drive by" acknowledgements. I'm not suggesting that any of you would support or engage in such a posture yourselves. Rather, I am more worried about the degree to which we as parents allow our children to get away with such behaviors when interacting with us, under the pretense that they are too busy, too stressed, too pre-occupied, or too rushed to stop and engage us in some meaningful conversation, or even legitimate answers to our queries about how they are doing. And yet, it is that meaningful conversation that can help each of you connect with your children in authentic and genuine ways, for behind that exterior of invincibility students like to project is a person who can still benefit

from some good old fashion “lap time” (even though they have been too big to assume the physical position for some years now).

Admittedly, there are many of our students whose coping strategies are such that they do, indeed, have it all together. They approach life with confident reassurance, have their dreams and aspirations crystallized to the point that they make clear and sequential decisions, have great relationships with peers and loved ones, and navigate their way through obstacles of life and academia as if they are mere inconveniences. For others however, the pretense of being “fine” masks a deeper psychic, emotional, and spiritual pain that can sometimes feel overwhelming. They feel depressed, anxious, scared, uncertain, confused, and generally bothered. This array of challenging emotions is but one culprit in their psychological unsteadiness. At a deeper level, feelings like the ones described above are often anchored in a set of beliefs that contribute to poor self-esteem, questions of worth, and an absence of affirmation about who they are as human beings. These beliefs include:

- Worrying too much about what others think
- Fear of failure
- Low frustration tolerance
- And the tendency to externalize blame and responsibility

In some respects, this generation has lost the capacity to distinguish between how they perform as students or what they do for a living, and who they are as people. In a society that quickly judges people’s worth on their material assets and acquisitions, it’s not difficult to understand how our children sometimes arrive at those conclusions.

Despite this circumstance, please know that we at UCI take the emotional and psychological health of your sons and daughters very seriously. We will do our part to create a nurturing environment that supports the development of strong minds, healthy bodies, enlivened spirits, and clear aspirations. We will also seek to engage them in conversations and experiences that affirm their sense of humanity, regardless of their racial, gender, sexual orientation, social class, disability status, or other demographic. But, we need you to engage them as well.

We need you to slow down your conversations with them long enough to connect in authentic and genuine ways. Take a few moments, or even hours, and find out how your students are really doing. Ask them how they are feeling about themselves and their space in life. Ask them how are they feeling about their

relationship with you and whether or not they feel more affirmed or critiqued by your past conversations. Ask them about their academic performance and whether or not they are satisfied with their efforts and outcomes. Ask them what they need from you as parents by way of emotional support and time to connect by phone or in person. Find out if they have ever had to cope with feelings of depression and whether or not their sense of self-worth is intact. Most of all, seek to touch them in those places and spaces where they often hide their worries and fears. Above all, let them know you love them and are there for them. That is perhaps the most authentic feeling of all, when they know they can proceed with that confident reassurance that is uniquely derived from a parent's affirmation. We have an array of counseling and health services and professionals ready to help them.