

Boots on the Ground Parenting
Top Five Calls from College and How to Handle Them

1. Mary calls three weeks after you dropped her off and is in the midst of a full blown roommate crisis?

Your job is to coach her through the problem not solve it for her. You must stay calm and communicate to Mary that she can handle this situation. Encourage her to wait 24 hours to let things settle down before she takes any action. More times than not you will talk to her the next day and the entire landscape will have changed. If action needs to be taken let her do it herself! Ask questions instead of offering suggestions. "What is the process at the university for addressing roommate issues?" "Where can you go to find out." "Is that something you have time to do today?" etc.

2. Johnny calls after you see him on parent's weekend and says he hates the university; the people are mean; the professors are stupid; and the food sucks?

Your first response is to connect with how Johnny is feeling and draw him out. "Sounds like you are having a tough day. Did something in particular happen?" Stay calm. Chances are he really is just having a bad day and wants you to know. Could also be he is missing you and is a bit homesick. Don't be tempted to solve his problems. Let him know you will check in with him in a few days and in the meantime send him a care package so you can sleep.

When you talk to him a few days later he is still very unhappy. Hopefully you have set the expectation with Johnny before he left for school that he will be staying at this university for the first year. You say, "Remember Johnny that you will be staying at this school for at least the first full year. What could you do to make your experience better? What do you think needs to change for you to be happy there?" Again, do not get caught up in the drama of the situation. He needs you to be loving and empathetic but at the same time return the responsibility to him. You could share a personal experience that he can relate to. "I felt so unhappy my first semester in college. Making friends was different than in high school, the academics were harder and I missed my house...But over time I ended up loving my school. I joined a few clubs and did some intermural sports and that helped me feel at home."

3. Jenny calls distraught to tell you she is failing her Spanish class and today is the deadline for dropping it without a penalty. It's 3:00 in the afternoon and the registrar office closes at 4:30.



ALICIA FARRELL PHD
COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGIST

You could get angry and say, “Jenny, what were you thinking waiting until now to tell me about this. Why didn’t you get help sooner?” This will shame Jenny and make her feel even worse than she already does. Think about what you want to teach her in this situation. You could say, “Give me the name of the class and the registration number. I will call the registrar right now and figure out what our options are.” This response teaches Jenny that she is not capable of solving her own problems and she can depend on you to take care of everything for her.

Instead say something like this, “What are your options and what do you think you should do?” If she doesn’t know you say, “There is plenty of time for you to either go over or call the registrar and figure things out. I will support any decision you make. Just remember that if you drop it you will need to make it up this summer. I don’t know but perhaps you could get a tutor on campus and get that grade up. Up to you sweetheart. Let me know what you decide. If I can help you think through your options some more just give me a call.”

4. It had been 6 weeks since you dropped Tommy off and he calls to tell you that not only has he run out of money but he lost his wallet two week ago and it had his credit card in it.

Holy shitski! Now your adrenaline is really pumping. First, take a time out. Maybe even tell Tommy that you need to call him back in a few minutes because he has caught you at a bad time. This is one you want to think through before you respond. When you get him on the phone again you say, “Learning to manage money can be tricky at first. What do you find your spending money on? Have any ideas on how you can manage your cash flow differently? Maybe instead of putting all of your cash for the semester into your checking account at once I should put just what you need in for the week until you get the hang of it. How does that sound? About your wallet. When you lose your identification and credit cards it is very important to report them stolen because.....Here’s how you do it and here are the numbers you need to get it done. It is very important this is done today. Perhaps you should check lost and found on campus first before you go to that trouble. Let me know how things go.”

5. Patty calls to tell you that she has been written up by the dorm RA for having and drinking alcohol in her room. There is a \$150 fine, she has to go in front of a disciplinary board and one more infraction will get her kicked out of school. Patty says she wasn’t drinking but was in the room.

Now you are downright angry. There are serious consequences to this bad judgement and the responsibility rests completely with Patty. Here’s what NOT to say, “How dare that



ALICIA FARRELL PHD
COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGIST

RA write you up when you just happened to be there at the wrong time. I am going to call that university and give them a piece of my mind. Don't worry, honey, I'll fix this!"

I know, you want to believe your child and indeed they may be telling the truth. Regardless, you will never know what really happened and your child needs to learn the hard way that they can be guilty due to association and how to handle that. You want to say, "If indeed you were not drinking and just happened to be in the room, you may want to find out what your recourse is to communicate your innocence. Perhaps there is someone above the RA you can plead your case to. Is that something you are prepared to do?" If they say "yes" then your job is to coach them through the process without taking responsibility for telling them what to do or how to do it. Also let them know that if they end up owing the fine they are responsible for paying it out of their own money. If they say "no" then you say, "Okay, I'm sure this must be very upsetting to you. We all make mistakes. I'm not happy about this one but really this isn't about me. You are a young adult now and are responsible for the choices you make. Sounds like you can get through this one by paying the fine (out of your own money) and talking to the disciplinary board. Hopefully you will learn from this experience. I would feel terrible for you, after you have worked so hard to get to school, to have to come home because of poor judgement."