

A Shift in Dynamics

Written by Jenni Person, BT Contributor
July 2019

Life looms large for the pod squad



his week I dropped off my son at the airport for a two-month escapade. It was just two weeks after I received my daughter back home after four months away. This is not fun. I don't like this.

I know the whole point is that as parents, we're supposed to prepare them for this. We're supposed to raise them to be independent and self-sufficient and individual from us. We're supposed to be proud of them for going off to sleepaway camp and summer programs. And perhaps most realistically, we're supposed to feel relief for the break in child-care intensity -- during which time we scour the camp's photo site daily for a glimpse of our spawn's face among spirit week paint splattering and song sessions that seem more aerodynamic than we remember from our own camp days.

I think I recently hit the tipping point at which their absences cause much more longing than relief. And this isn't because there's less care to provide and thus less to be relieved from. Indeed, the maxim that "bigger kids mean bigger problems" rings true. Thanks to technology, I wasn't relieved of that duty while my daughter was abroad for the spring semester of her high school sophomore year. Instead, technology totally underscored my continuing parenting duties. In a perfect confluence of technological advances, my kids' digital-native status, adolescent angst, and newfound independence and autonomy, daily parenting remained intact.

Thanks to decent Wi-Fi and free web-based texting, calling, and video-chatting across 7000 miles, my daughter was in touch with me every day about the same teen crises that she lobbed

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at me when in the same room here in Miami. I explored the deep social implications of particular shoes, existential ponderings surrounding her identity formation as borne out of choices I made during her childhood, and the extensive possible academic consequences of not giving a shit about math over WhatsApp.

By e-mail and texts linking to Google docs, I read her papers at her request, cheering and supporting her ideas and conclusions, and, when we were in the document together, watching and discussing her edits in real time.

In the meantime, while my daughter was away, my son blossomed in the extra space that opened up. I heard his voice more -- literally. Longer sentences emerged from a kid not interrupted or overshadowed by a big sister. It was extraordinarily gratifying. He seemed to grow like a weed in that time, which happened to coincide with the descent from his demanding journey of becoming a Bar Mitzvah.

Just two months later, my son performed a solo dance-theater piece in a professional production, having worked for several months with a choreographer as he developed the work. He handled the live performances, media attention, and having friends in the audience with incredible poise and maturity.

It is unclear whether it was because those efforts, those accomplishments, were behind him that he was stunningly so grown up. Or if it was because of the space he was suddenly allowed to occupy as an only child in our home. This was a status he'd never had the privilege of enjoying for more than a month when his big sister was away.

Suddenly I have two teens, two full individuals with their own voices, an amount of agency like never before in their lives. So I think this newfound pining is more about the fact that they're at an age where they're creeping toward college. This means we can no longer avoid the reality that our time as a pod squad is over as they transition to dorms across the state or across the country, followed inevitably by getting their own apartments in New York, western Massachusetts, another country, or for some odd and bitter-cold reason, in the Midwest. I don't know how my friends and family who are empty-nesters managed this so gracefully and productively. Even though I am always a major proponent of my kids' independence, I'm pretty sure I will be a bumbling mess the day I drop my oldest at her dorm in a couple of years, let alone my youngest. Oy.

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Maybe it's because as they've gotten older and become people -- individual people, with their own ideas and aspirations and perspectives on the world -- I've grown to love them as that. They have become part of the conversation, the ambient information that forms our days. I love hearing not just about their days, but also about their opinions, even if they're different from my own -- maybe *because* of the ways they're different from my own. This deepens our world as parents, expands our experiences, and broadens our views, all exponentially. Much of that is available long distance, clearly. But I still want to be able to smell their sweet heads, like when they were born.

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