It’s mid-August, and 21 million young adults in the United States are getting ready for college. For many of these students, it is a first-time experience that inspires excitement, optimism and more than a little anxiety.

The same can be said for many of their parents and other loved ones, especially those who themselves did not attend college. On Move-In Day at Cornell, we watch thousands of miniature dramas play out at the moment when families must detach from a precious young person and trust in his or her values, judgment and willpower.

The good news is that most will recover and thrive (we’re still talking about the parents). In our experience, the most successful transitions occur when parents recognize that their role as Decider-in-Chief should, can and must be over. In the best scenarios, parents become trusted advisors to their children, whose goals and expectations change from compliance with “house rules” to progress toward responsible adulthood and completion of a degree.

The essential first step, in our judgment, is for students and parents to understand that college is different from high school. Most colleges and universities expect first-year students to make the decisions about class selection, coursework, social life and their personal well-being. They also expect them to learn from, and take responsibility for, the consequences of those decisions.

Our advisors talk to a lot of parents and family members, including those who can’t quite make the leap. According to David DeVries, associate dean for undergraduate education in Cornell’s College of Arts and Sciences, “The most common questions from parents are technical ones about academic credits: which Advanced Placement credits count, the nuts and bolts of
course selection, and how the requirements of majors can be most expeditiously completed.” They make furtive calls to the advising office about their child’s “academic direction” and “worry that there is an exact sequence of classes students have to take in order to graduate on time.”

DeVries and his colleagues usually suggest that the parents let the students figure it out for themselves, assuring them help is available and that the college encourages exploration and intellectual curiosity and can accommodate an occasional mistake with generous deadlines for dropping courses.

Sometimes, indeed rather often, students change a major, or even a college within the university. Each year nearly 400 undergraduates transfer within Cornell to a different undergraduate college. In the College of Arts and Sciences, up to 300 freshmen arrive each year planning to major in biology, but only 150 of them ultimately graduate as biology majors.

It can be disconcerting to find out that the budding doctor you plied with toy stethoscopes and Grey’s Anatomy coloring books has discovered a latent passion for architecture, but we believe it’s important for parents to be open to what first-year students’ academic experiences tell them about what they’re interested in and best at.

Grades present another potential point of contention. Many colleges and universities, including Cornell, permit students to decide whether their records—including their professors’ names, course schedules and grades—will be shared with their parents. We recommend that you discuss this issue with your student, with the goal of agreeing on a plan for keeping you apprised of academic progress.

Parents and children both may get a shock when the first “prelim” grades come in after mid-term exams. For lifelong high achievers and for parents with great expectations, a C, or for that matter, a B+, can be traumatic, especially in an era of grade inflation. Family members should assure themselves—and one another—that it is not a final judgment on the abilities of the student or on his or her professional prospects.

Some students report every setback, academic or otherwise, to their families. They may express insecurity, loneliness, homesickness, anger and disappointment. We urge you to listen carefully. You will know, better than anyone else, if these feelings will dissipate on their own or if peer counseling or a visit with a concerned adult or a therapist is appropriate. If you’re not sure, and the problem persists, contact an advisor at the school.
You can also help by putting disappointments in perspective. If the concern is the grade, encourage your child to go over the exam and his or her notes on lectures and required reading (we recommend that every student take notes on assigned reading) with the teaching assistant or professor. It might be helpful as well to encourage your student to study during the day (between classes) rather than waiting until after dinner, when fatigue sets in and other students in the residence hall want to talk or do “something fun.”

If the trouble is an unhappy roommate situation, suggest that your child first address his or her concerns with that person; if that doesn’t work, suggest involving the resident advisor. Don’t just immediately demand that a room switch must be made.

Some students have to be reminded to return phone calls or emails from home, while others call every day. Many seesaw between full disclosure and need-to-know, depending on topic, state of mind and who might overhear their end of the conversation.

Please remember that your student’s maturing process—like your own—will likely involve ups and downs, academic twists and turns, intimate relationships entered into and ended, and sometimes, unfortunately, experimentation with drinking and drugs. While you can help by reminding students of the institution’s expectations as well as those of the law, respect for your student’s autonomy, good judgment and adherence to the values you have helped instill is likely to be rewarded in the long term.

In our communications with first-year students, we emphasize the importance of knowing when to ask for help, and we ask parents to reinforce that message. Save the college websites and new-student materials with information about tutors, peer advisors, writing workshops, study skills services and academic and personal counseling offices and be ready to suggest the appropriate contact if your student seems to be struggling in one area or another.

If your child seems overwhelmed, you may need to contact the appropriate resources yourself. Start by contacting the staff at your student’s residence hall, the student services office in the college or the dean of students. If you suspect that your child is experiencing something more serious than simple homesickness, don’t hesitate to step in until he or she regains equilibrium and can assume control of a recovery plan.

Resist the impulse to forbid your student to get a job or participate in student activities or volunteer in the community. Parents often believe that extracurricular activities detract in a major way from academic performance, but that theory isn’t borne out by research, for example, a study of part-time employment. After a day of sitting through lectures, an hour with a choral
group or ultimate Frisbee may actually help a student buckle down and study. In addition to income, a well-chosen student job can provide opportunities to apply what a student is learning in class and become familiar with the realities and expectations of the workplace. Working in the community often can help your student develop perspective and put his or her situation in a much broader context.

In general, prepare to be sympathetic, supportive and patient. Recognize that doing nothing is often the best option. The fact is that after a few wobbly weeks or months, the great majority of first-year students settle in quite nicely. “When I first arrived, I thought, ‘I’m going to die here,’” said one of our undergraduates. A native of Newark, New Jersey, she found life in rural Ithaca, New York, by turns, secluded, stimulating and stressful. No doubt her family got an earful of complaints. A year later she declared, “I can’t believe how noisy my old neighborhood is. I can only sleep at Cornell. And I kind of hate it when I have to leave.”