Listening Skills on the Phone

As parents, you have been listening to your student for almost 20 years. Although you likely know your student better than anyone else, many changes will take place during the college years. Not seeing your student on a daily basis will impact how she talks to you—and how you need to listen. Since you’ll do most of your communicating via phone, here are some tips on listening from afar:

**Be encouraging.**
- Try to convey interest, no matter how simplistic or mundane the topic is. If your student called home, she wants to connect with you.
- Try not to agree or disagree with the student.
- Be patient and try not to interrupt.
- Ask open-ended questions such as, “Can you tell me more…?”

**Ask clarifying questions.**
- Ask questions to gather more information and better understand your student’s point of view.
- Ask open-ended questions such as, “When did this happen?”

**Restate what you hear.**
- Restate basic ideas and facts to show you are listening and understanding what is being said.
- Concentrate on “hidden” emotional meanings.
- Ask questions such as, “So you would like your roommate to stop eating your snacks?”

**Reflect on what was shared.**
- Reflect on your student’s basic feelings to show that you understand what she’s telling you.
- Don’t assume to understand.
- Think about what is not said.
- Help your student evaluate her own feelings by reflecting on what she shared.
- Make statements such as, “You seem very upset.” This will reassure your student that you understand and support her.

**Summarize the important pieces.**
- Restate the major ideas expressed, including feelings, to help your student establish an action plan.
- Help your student sort out the important aspects of the conversation, without diminishing her feelings.
- Make statements such as, “These seem to be the key things you expressed…”

**Validate thoughts and feelings.**
- Acknowledge the value of your student’s feelings.
- Try to keep your own emotions from interfering with your ability to listen openly. You don’t have to agree in order to be a good listener.
- Express appreciation for your student’s efforts and actions, even if they seem minimal. This will remind your student that she has a cheering section—even if it is far away!
- Make statements such as, “I am happy you called home to talk this through with me…” Chances are, she’ll do it again next time there’s something on her mind!

**5 Tips for Parents**

Here are suggestions for parents from students themselves:

1. **Focus 100% attention on the phone call.** If you can’t at the time of the call, tell us so we can call back.
2. **Ask questions that express genuine interest, even if you don’t always understand what we are talking about.**
3. **Don’t pressure us about grades and schoolwork, and instead ask us about what we are learning and enjoying about our classes.** Then, we can engage on an intellectual level without worrying that all you care about is our GPA.
4. **Ask us about our relationships with friends, faculty, and administrators—but without prying.** Talk with us about our social life, but don’t let on that you are worried about our behaviors. Instead, use these conversations to gauge how we are doing emotionally. Our ability to maintain and nurture quality relationships on campus directly relates to our comfort level and happiness.
5. **Keep in mind that even though we are growing more independent of you, it’s interdependence we ultimately seek.** The college years are the time when we can begin having more mature conversations with you. Keep an open mind and remember that we make our own decisions on a daily basis. However, we still call home for guidance, reassurance, and support.
Staying Connected with Your Student from Afar

Out of sight, out of mind? Not necessarily. If you’ve ever felt that way, you are not alone. Students who are away at college often get so wrapped up in their life at school, that it is easy to say, “I’ll call home tomorrow.” The next thing she knows, days have passed and you’re left wondering if she’ll ever call.

When’s a Good Time?

Talk with your student to find out about her class schedule. Knowing her schedule is good, because then you can ask about her classes and understand what she is learning. It is also helpful so you know when to try to reach her. Maybe it’s better to call on Sundays after dinner. Perhaps after her Tuesday night class is best. Either way, you’ll know when it’s best to try to reach her, which leads to the next question.

Cell Phones and Landlines

Is it best to reach her in her room or on her cell phone? You never know where she’ll be when you call her cell phone, but you know you’ll reach her, or you will at least be able to leave a voicemail message just for her. If she uses her room phone regularly, make sure she and her roommate work out a system for leaving messages for one another.

Email Contact

Students are so electronically connected today, maybe email is a good way to keep in touch regularly. While some personal email accounts can be accessed while away at college, your student will automatically be issued a college email address, which you can use. Then, she can reply to you at her earliest convenience.

Keep in Touch

Other inexpensive ways to keep in touch with your student include:

- A page-a-day calendar. Open it up and write little notes on a few days as a surprise.
- Send clippings from the local newspaper to help keep him connected with home. Send news about wedding announcements, successful sports teams or local groups he participated in. It’s nice to know what’s happening with friends at home, too.
- Use a photo as a postcard. Glue heavy cardstock, cut to the same size as the photo, and drop it in the mail. What a surprise to see her dog smiling at her from her campus mailbox!

Convenient Care Packages

Graphic idea: birthday cake with streamers, or a present that has the word ‘surprise’ on it

Programs run by food service or hall government often offer care packages. These might be available for birthdays, holidays or finals week. Watch the mail for order forms or contact the Residence Life Office to ask about programs like this.

Instant Messenger

Or how about Instant Messenger (IM)? This is a real-time chat. If you are a good typist and have access, this is an easy way to ask a quick question or to say hello. Have her set it up on your home computer when she comes home to visit the first time.

Nothing Like Real Mail!

Regular mail is always appreciated. Residential students are typically issued an on-campus mailbox when they sign up for housing. This allows you to send cards and packages to a secure location on campus. Your student will always walk away from the mailroom with a smile on her face when she has received mail from home.