

When Education Becomes a Family Affair

Roosevelt University prides itself on its welcoming atmosphere, and nowhere is this better demonstrated than with the non-traditional student. More men and women in the United States are getting home from work, spending time with family and then – on a few nights and Saturdays – trekking out to class. It is becoming common that the kitchen table is the place where parents *and* children study, where dads or moms lift their heads out of their textbooks to help with the children's homework before getting back to their own!

Parents return to school for many reasons. Life circumstances might have intervened when they were college-age and obtaining a college degree became a dream deferred. Also, the wish for a career change or advancement can spur the return to school. For example, because the job marketplace is highly competitive, a new degree can be a fresh start. Some employers are sensitive to their employees' wishes to return to school and encourage them through tuition reimbursement plans. However, despite the reason for returning, the motivation for an individual to pursue the degree will most likely be internal.

Self-Esteem and Motivation

It can be daunting to begin classes after a long absence. However, there are advantages to being a non-traditional student. Juggling work and family is difficult. Adding school to the mix is a challenge. Thus, the successful experiences of life help to bolster self-esteem. Fortunately, most returning students have a greater degree of motivation. There is a sense of seriousness about learning that comes with age. Adult students return of their own volition; no one is forcing them to sign up for classes.

An unshakable core of determination can get an adult through some long evenings reading a particularly tedious text, or slogging through a 15-page research paper. Returning students who are also parents have learned to keep their "eyes on the prize." They have learned that long-term goals can be seen as a series of mini-goals, which allows feelings of accomplishment and achievement to come often.

When Dad or Mom Returns to School

Children who are young might not understand why their moms or dads are at school. A child might not grasp that a parent may be returning in order to get a better job, to be a better person, or to live a better life...all with the best interests of his/her family at heart. The little ones just know mom or dad is not there.

In an ideal world, it is immeasurably helpful to have a supportive and loving spouse to help pick up the slack. When that is not the case, children – at all ages, even adolescents – need continual reminders that they are loved.

Children's feelings need to be valued. They should be free to express all of their emotions, not just the positive ones. They should be free to say: "I hate it when you're gone," or "You just don't care about me." Negative feelings should not be forced out of sight because they are difficult to face. Children need an outlet for their full range of expression.

Older children and adolescents have other difficulties. They might see a parent's return to school as an "encroachment" and even an embarrassment. It is vital to address these feelings in a caring and gentle way. With an older child, parents can be more open about their motivation to return, their career limitations, and the need for self-actualization.

School and Relationships

When a returning student is in a committed relationship, a cauldron of concerns can bubble up. Between the partners within a relationship there can be feelings of resentment and jealousy, or feelings of inadequacy and entitlement. The relationship can become unstable if a partner is not supportive of returning student's efforts.

The influence of work on family has been studied a great deal, but the effects of work and simultaneous continuing education on family has not been extensively examined. At least one study (Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2004), however, found that the conflicts and stress of combining work, school and family can be successfully controlled. The study found that the use of time management principles, flexibility on the part of all family members, and some time set aside for family togetherness can go a very long way in terms of keeping tensions controlled.

Financial Concerns and Time Constraints

The multiple roles of student/parent/worker can feel empowering, but taking on too many commitments can be personally devastating. Education is costly, and even with the help of employer tuition reimbursement programs, most families will feel the pinch. A sense of humor and a sense of shared purpose go a long way to maintain a returning student's momentum, and help ensure that a family unit remains strong.

The number of credit hours a returning student takes can make the difference between harmony at home and dissonance. Patience on the part of the returning student is necessary. Sometimes it is in the best interests of the family, initially, to maintain a slow and steady approach. Later, academic commitments can be increased, as the family adjusts to the changes in the daily routine.

The Positives

Returning students need, and count on, the support of their families. Many people report that going back to school has enriched their family lives in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. This can prove to be a good way to hone time management and coping skills. Also, returning students set a terrific example for their children through their commitment and perseverance.

Support and mutual understanding are crucial to handling change. Returning to school could prove disruptive to the status quo of any family, but with a strong foundation of trust and love, it can be a positive experience.