

Thanks, Dad, you've served your purpose

Parents are vital when college restarts: drive the car, carry the bags, pass the cash . . . **Duncan Hopper** explains

Across the United Kingdom, mothers are bidding fond farewells to their student offspring after the Easter holidays, and sending them back to their colleges and universities. One or other of the parents, usually the father (a useful male role at last, my younger daughter says), is designated to escort the privileged one safely to his or her destination.

Anyone travelling on any motorway during Saturday or Sunday has only to look about them to spot those college-bound: cars filled with suitcases, cardboard boxes and plastic bags; fluffy toys, duvets and cooking utensils scattered on top. Food and drink are loaded into every conceivable nook and cranny. Among them somewhere, usually in the back, are the students — asleep after a hard night's partying and saying goodbye to their old friends. They are surrounded by their term's life-support system, dreaming of the student heaven to come.

Those who can afford cars (dare I say, second or third years?) can be seen travelling alone, looking with disdain at the escorted travellers they pass, scoffing at this demonstration of continued reliance on

family. The old hands have a different status, described by my son at the end of his first week at university as being "legends in their own minds".

Meanwhile, back at home, anxious mothers, often surrounded by aunts and sisters, sit by the phone, maps and watches in hand, knowing exactly at what point in the route their darling one is, and awaiting the mid-trip progress report. Of course, if it had been the first term, the whole lot would have been en route as well.

Motorway service areas are undoubtedly the best places to observe all of this. Some advice: go early to get the best seat, count the number of bulging cars on the way there, spot the most loaded vehicle, note the service station queues for the mid-trip phone home and regard the glazed expressions of the fathers as they receive further instructions from their wives.

There is also a widely held belief that students do not feed themselves very well, if at all, when at university. They have other priorities for their time and grant money. I am

assured by my son that study and budgeting are not priorities — drink seems to be, however. Consequently, a parent feels much better if he/she has stopped and purchased a huge last supper for the offspring.

On arrival at the campus, it is vital that a parent knows how to behave. On no account must you recognise or speak to other parents when unloading the car. It is out of the question to strike up conversation with, or even acknowledge, another student. You will be ridiculed for posterity as trying to act like a student again, instead of filling your correct role as a geriatric.

Naturally, none of this applies to the offspring. They have free rein to talk to and to greet the other students, and do so effusively. Of course, there has been a lengthy absence of three or four weeks.

The best method of arrival I have found is to stop some five miles from the campus and allow your son or daughter to drive in themselves, while you mingle with the luggage at the back. Then you can emerge on arrival and be given unloading instructions.

The correct demeanour for this is for eyes to be downcast and to gaze strictly ahead. Then, loaded with everything heavy, you trot dutifully behind your offspring, who will be in conversation with some other student and carrying the least heavy item. The first day's beer supply is usually the correct thing to be seen with. One must then repeat the journey until the final item is installed in the accommodation.

We now come to the last rite: the fond farewell. It is, of course, utterly out of the question to display any emotion. My technique is to secrete a £20 note in the right hand, then to look the offspring manfully in the eye, proffering the outstretched arm and rustling the paper. My hand is then wrung, somewhat hastily, the money disappearing *en fist*. I then whisper the invocation: "Enjoy yourself and, please, please, phone Mum every week." This is simply a plea for my own sanity. I am always blamed for my son not being in touch.

A grunt received in reply should be more than adequate reward for all your effort. You should then turn, never looking back, and join the queue of other parents for the long trek home.