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I'm Trying to be a Cool Mom — But I Have No Idea If It's Working

By Joan McCain
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Four years ago, my husband and I took our first born, our daughter Kelly, to college. It felt like a huge moment in our parenting life — because it was. I admit I cried for a few miles on the way home, after a hot, sweaty, whirlwind flurry of moving her into her freshman dorm room. Within a week, I had written her this short note, tucked into a care package of brownies, sour gummy worms, and \$20 that I pulled out of my wallet when my husband wasn't looking.

Dear Kelly:

The day after we got back from taking you to college, I cleaned your room. For a long time. I took all the bed sheets off your bed — right down to the mattress — washed them, put them all back, perfectly making your bed. I had flipped the mattress and ironed your pillow cases. I even starched them so the creases are perfect and they lay just so.

I dusted every surface in your room (do you get any of that Bare Minerals powder on your face?), and shined anything that was left. No nook or cranny was left untouched.

I steamed the wood floors clean and found 37 bobby pins and 16 pony tail holders. I even picked up seven tiny rubber bands from when you had braces in middle school.

When it was done, it looked amazing. Smelled amazing. When Dad got home, I showed it off to him. "Look at how clean this room is," I beamed.

Every morning I go in there to see it. And guess what? It looks the same. Every day it's still clean. No half-empty Gatorade bottles on your dresser. No empty yogurt containers with the spoon glued to the side on your desk. No yoga pants on the floor.

This morning, I stood in the doorway for a long time. And I realized something. I like it better messy with you in it.

Love, Mom

I cried as I wrote that letter. But I also saw it as my acceptance of her moving out of our lives and creating her own. After all, that was our dream for her.

A month ago, she graduated from college. Her dietetics degree requires her to complete a year of unpaid internships in clinical and community settings before she takes her state boards and becomes employable. Kelly set those up in her hometown to save us the expense of housing. So she has moved back home, into her room.

She returned with three times the amount of stuff she left with, the result of having her first apartment, her own kitchen gadgets, and décor items collected over four years of shopping at Target and crafted after too much time spent on Pinterest.

It took a week to sort, box, store it, and stuff it into closets and our garage until the day she leaves our home, a second time, to start her life, again.

Her room is messy, just like it was her whole life. In the letter I penned four years before, I said I liked it better that way. I might have lied.

She was more honest when she said, months before her graduation, she was not excited about moving back into her parents' house. It is not that we have a long list of rules, or impose 11 p.m. curfews, or monitor her every move. We do not. It is understandable she loved being independent in college, as she displayed strong traits of being independent as a toddler.

So I am trying to be a cool mom. To give her a wide berth. To make her feel like she can be independent even if she is living in her old room, in her old house, with her old parents. I have no idea if it is working.

But I had a sign, however small yet significant, that it just might be. A little. Last weekend, she cleaned her room. She washed her sheets, made her bed, vacuumed and mopped the wood floor, and dusted all the surfaces.

And I didn't even have to ask.

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