Chapter 1

Parents Handling Your Problems

What You May Think:
Mom talked to my teachers in high school when I had problems. I’ll let her continue doing her good work.

What Your Professor Thinks:
Your parents may have done high school for you, but they can’t (and shouldn’t) do college for you.

The Real Story
“My prof writes nasty feedback on my papers. It feels like he’s attacking me!”

Beck, one of my advisees, sat in my office, telling me about problems with one of his profs (See? Already, I’m telling you about another student complaining about a prof). He was worried he might not make it through the class, which could affect his graduation plan.
“What does he say?” I asked.
“Things like ‘Did you NOT understand this source wasn’t credible?’”

Now don’t get me wrong, students complain about professors all the time:
We lecture too much.
We grade too hard.
We create tests that contain nothing we covered in class. (Okay, I hated that when I was a student, too).

Students complain about all sorts of things, but Beck’s concern seemed valid to me. I wouldn’t want someone writing that on my paper either.

“I want to drop his class!” Beck, usually a quiet guy, actually hit a five in volume.

It was mid-term, so Beck would not receive a refund if he withdrew. And let’s be real: We can’t always run away from people who upset us, right? We may want to run away (or run over that person with a monster truck), but instead, we have to manage the situation—and ourselves.

“Why not request a meeting with the prof instead? Tell him how his feedback is affecting you,” I suggested.

“What would I say?” Beck asked, his face telling me he’d rather have surgery without anesthesia.

“Well, you can say, ‘Professor Jones, I appreciate your thoughts about my work, but I’m having trouble with the comments you write on my paper. They seem like you’re criticizing me as a person, rather than my writing. I’m starting to get nervous about turning work in. May I have some exact instructions on how to improve?’”

The look on Beck’s face told me he was ready to suggest I have surgery without anesthesia. He shook his head and his voice lowered again. “I can’t do that. I don’t like arguments,” he muttered.

I said, “Confronting your professor is important so he’ll know you aren’t comfortable with the way he’s teaching you. Think about when you’re evaluated by your boss someday. Let’s say your boss gets nasty every time he tells you to do something differently. You’d ask the boss for specific feedback because you want to do a good job. This professor may not realize his comments come across in such a demeaning way.”

Beck looked doubtful, but picked up his pen and opened his notebook. “So what should I say? Tell me again.”

Beck agreed he’d make an appointment with the prof the next day and then let me know what happened.

Well, get ready for a twist … Beck didn’t see the professor. His mother did.

But first, Beck’s mother called me: “Mrs. Bremen, Beck is having big trouble with one of his professors,” she snapped. “This guy is using too
Say This NOT That to Your Professor

much negative reinforcement with my son. He treats Beck like he does nothing right even when he’s trying his hardest. I want to schedule a meeting with this jerk and find out why he’s putting down my kid!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Legally, I can’t discuss this situation with you.”

“What do you mean?” she growled. “That’s crazy. This is my kid! I’m paying good money for his education and I have a right to know what’s going on.”

The Back Story

Are you surprised I used the word legally? I’m not a lawyer, nor do I play one on TV or cable, but I do know about The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), a law enabling students to keep their education a private matter once they hit age 18.

So, legally your professors cannot discuss how you’re doing with your parents without your permission. The only exception to this law is if you sign paperwork with the Registrar’s office giving Mom or Dad freedom to see your educational records or speak to your profs.

Are you having a small party in your head right now? Woo hoo! Dad can’t pick up the phone and randomly call your professor for status updates! You’re in the clear!

Other students, like Beck, or helicopter parents, like his mother, are shocked by this law. Let’s face it: if Mom and Dad have been stomping into his classroom or principal’s office every time Beck’s pencil broke, taking care of his own college business is going to be a shift for both parties.

Most of the phone calls I receive from parents are well-intentioned. Maybe Jamison’s parents are getting divorced, and he’s so upset his concentration is threatened. Perhaps Jacqueline is telling her parents she’s going to class, but instead she’s heading down the street to her 40-year-old boyfriend’s house. Maybe Jake’s parents have been blindsided by bad report cards when he told them he was doing well.

I’m a mom of two young kids, ages 4 and 9. I imagine it’s a gigantic adjustment to go from annual parent-teacher conferences and full access to a child’s educational information to no information—other than what my child chooses to tell me—once college starts. I would want to know my hard-earned money, or my son or daughter’s scholarship or financial aid, isn’t going to waste. I would want to know if my daughter is drooling and snoring in bed rather than sitting in class. I also want to know if she’s struggling in a class she is attending.
As a professor, I take a different position on this subject. Without your parents having front-line, hovering knowledge of your educational issues, you’re forced to take care of them yourself. I’m not saying you should keep your academic struggles from your parents, but you need to start that conversation. Then, you can tell your parents about options you’re exploring and get their feedback. They will be impressed and proud of you for working through your own obstacles—even if they get heavy-handed with the advice.

Ask Yourself This:

Did my mom and dad handle school problems for me in high school? If so, did I want them to go talk to my teachers or the principal? When they intervened, did it make me feel angry, untrustworthy, irresponsible, relieved, or thankful?

Did I ever go to teachers on my own for help? What was the best experience I had talking to a teacher when I needed help? What was the worst experience?

If I went to a teacher for help and created a positive outcome, did that make me feel confident, happy, and motivated?

Think This:

If my parents previously handled my school business, taking on these issues will be a switch for me. If I have ever taken on an academic issue by myself, then I have proven to myself that I can handle it.

I realize college feels different. You may be terrified to confront your professors. Totally understandable, but think about it: As long as you stay in control and speak in a calm, professional way, what’s the worst that can happen? It’s not like you’re going to lose your job or get kicked out of school just for standing up for yourself. Your professor isn’t going to bite your wrist, and technically she can’t drop your grade just because she doesn’t like what you have to say. She may be gruff, grumpy, or whatever, but a rough demeanor doesn’t translate into you getting a poor grade.

If the conversation doesn’t go well, you can go higher—to the department chair, division chair—even the dean of instruction or vice president of the college (See Chapter 31). Colleges have a chain of command, just like any other business. Chances are you’ll be able to work out the situation before any of that happens. Believe in yourself.
Use good words to solve the issue. You’ll feel more confident every time you try.

**Not That:**

I’m going to drop this class because I can’t stand this professor!

A term is only 10-15 weeks at most (depending on quarter or semester). Even if you can’t get through to your professor with the communication tips I recommend, you won’t be with this person forever.

And what happens if you don’t like the next professor who teaches this subject? Are you going to keep dropping classes and losing money? Stick it out. You’ll learn far more by staying with a challenging situation and overcoming it than by running away. Staying in the wolf’s den will increase your confidence when other wolves bare their teeth.

I’m going to sign the darned FER-whatever paper so my Mom or Dad can go tell that guy off!

Are you kidding? This is college! You’re an adult, remember? It’s time to fight your own battles. Having your parents save the day won’t give you the practice you need to deal with conflict in the future. What’s next? Having Mom defend you during an argument with your best friend? Having Dad sit down for a little chat with your girlfriend when she changes her relationship status on Facebook? Let me give you one more dose of reality: Believe it or not, some students bring parents to job interviews. Seriously. Employers never look upon this favorably and those students do not get jobs. If you can’t imagine taking Mom or Dad to a job interview or solving your relationship issues (and hopefully that makes you cringe to even think about), then don’t have Mom or Dad do college for you.

**Say This:**

If you come across a frustrating situation with a professor, similar to the problem Beck experienced, do what he should have done. Make an appointment with the professor and say,

Thank you for taking time to see me today, Professor Frodo. When I read the comments you make on my papers, I feel like you’re attacking my work. This is the way I’m taking your words and I could be mistaken, but I have a hard time focusing on improving my work when the comments seem so harsh. Can we talk about what’s wrong with my papers so I can improve them?
You can use this same strategy to deal with any other issue where you feel a professor is treating you poorly. This doesn’t occur often, but whether perceived or real, it can happen. Sometimes a student will say to me, “That professor just doesn’t like me.”

I do not recommend going to your professor and saying, “I don’t think you like me.” The professor doesn’t have to like you. The professor has to be fair in his instruction and grading. A friendly working relationship is a bonus, and more often than not, it will happen. Instead, you should say to a prof,

I have a lot to learn from you, but I’m getting a sense you’re frustrated with me or my work. I want to do my best in this class. Is there something I need to do differently?

Not That:
- You must not like me very much to say these things.
- I must be a total screw up, and I can’t do anything right in this class.
- You’re a real jerk, and you must not care about your students’ feelings.

Acting angry or becoming a victim will not get your message across. Instead, ask questions and use “I” language—as sampled in the previous “Say This” example—to focus on what you’re thinking and feeling.

The End Note
Are you wondering what happened with Beck?

My last words to Beck’s mother were, “If a student comes to me about problems with a professor, I usually suggest he make an appointment and speak directly to that professor.”

So she did. Even though I warned her that Professor Jones wouldn’t be able to speak to her without the signed FERPA paperwork. Beck’s helicopter mother took a city tour of the prof’s office: She swooped right in during his next office hour.

Here’s where I’m concerned about this situation: Beck missed a huge opportunity to advocate for himself—an experience that could have given him confidence for future conflict situations. And what if he has a different issue with another professor next semester, or the one after that? At what point will he take responsibility for his education—and earn his professor’s respect?
Here’s another quick story: Mary was a struggling student of mine, all by her own doing. She skipped class, didn’t follow through on assignments or studying, and semester after semester, repeatedly fell apart on promises to her parents that she would do better.

Mary did sign the FERPA paperwork giving her parents access to her records and her profs right at the outset of her college career, but it didn’t make any difference. The only benefit Mary’s parents had was the ability to find out directly from a prof just how poorly Mary was doing—and how much money was wasted on her education. Not surprisingly, Mary ended up on academic probation, which required a hearing.

Ready for another twist? Mary didn’t have her parents attend the hearing. She went alone. I wasn’t expecting her explanation: “If my parents came, I knew I wouldn’t take it seriously. I probably needed it to happen and I needed to do it on my own.” Mary did turn things around for herself. Her chosen independence at the academic hearing was a clear first step.

Let’s focus on how handling your own problems in college can benefit you.

- You’ll likely have a better relationship with your professor, especially if your conversation goes well.
- You’ll have a better idea of what this person who’s grading your work is expecting from you—and that’s vital to your success. Having a stronger feedback loop gives you a chance to get better grades because you know what’s required.
- You’ll gain confidence in dealing with conflicts. If you need to confront another professor, you’ll have this experience to draw on.

Speaking of conflict management, let’s look at the future for a second. Conflict is all over our everyday lives. You probably know that. Some parents may argue that an 18-year-old is an adult in body, but not necessarily emotionally mature enough to handle stressful confrontations. I say that at 18, high school is over and it’s time to start figuring out the rest of the world. You’re in college anyway, so why not use the people and situations there as a safe training ground to deal with conflict and practice resolving situations in an assertive, professional, and proactive manner?

Bottom line: College has no PTA. Parents cannot and should not handle college-related problems for you.
Join your own SPA: The Student-Professor Association.
   You hold all the meetings.
   You set the agendas.
   You gain all the academic benefits.
   And they last a lifetime.