

How to get your teen ready for college

Dr. Ruth Peters helps you prepare your high school grad for this next step

By Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

Finally, your teen has graduated high school, been accepted at a college and is moving to the dorm. If you think that the difficult stuff is over, well, think again! Going off to college can be a great experience, but it's a complicated affair involving more decisions than perhaps you bargained for! Prepared families seem to fare better, so let's take a gander at some of the decisions to be made and options to be considered.

Packing up

Assuming you've all survived the summer in one piece, the going off to college routine really has several distinct parts to it. First comes the difficult distinction between "What I want to take with me" vs. "What I have room for and what the college will allow in a dorm." Usually the two are very different. Kids want to take a lot — their computer, stereo/CD system, all of their clothes, music, pictures, yearbooks and the list goes on. Trust me, there is not enough room for all of that! Dormitories are usually tiny, cramped spaces and the kid generally has to share it with at least one other person. So forget the knickknacks and stick to the basics. Every college or university offers a list of necessary items to bring — just check their Web site or call the housing or admissions offices for further information. You can always send items at a later date if it is really necessary. And, keep in mind that stuff gets stolen at school. I don't care if it is an Ivy League school or a tiny institution — if the item isn't tied down or locked up consider it at risk. Laptop computers should have the capability to be locked to the desk (yes, there is a locking device available just for that purpose) and credit cards, cash, digital cameras as well as other valuables should be kept in a *locked* file cabinet in the student's room. And, it should be *kept* locked as well as the door to the room.

Physically OK?

If your teen is like most others, the last place they want to visit is the infirmary. So, please be sure that their medications (for allergies, asthma, and birth control if that is an issue) are up-to-date and packed. It's a good idea to have your teen get a physical with his or her pediatrician or physician, just to make sure that everything is working well and that there are no physical limitations that have to be addressed. Make sure that all vaccinations are updated — measles, mumps and rubella vaccines should have been given at one and five years of age for entrance into all public schools. Make sure that your child has had the hepatitis B vaccine, as well as Menactra — a newer vaccine for meningitis that is specific to

the strain that appears to haunt the halls of college dormitories. In fact, many parents are having their younger children who attend camps at colleges during the summer get the Menactra shot before leaving. Also, please ask your teen's physician to speak a bit about exercise, nutrition and the dreaded "Freshman 15" — the 5- to 15-pound weight gain that many kids experience during the first year or so of college. Review healthy food choices and where the child can exercise cheaply (or for free), safely and conveniently.

Emotionally OK?

You know your son or daughter better than anyone, and if you sense more than a bit of anxiety about the move, be sure to address that. Many kids have fears about not being able to fit in, making friends, leaving old buddies or loves, and how they'll fare without Mom or Dad to talk to on a daily basis. Some teens, of course, are raring to go and won't give it a second thought, but many, many fresh high school graduates are fearful of the unknown. Some may even be depressed about leaving home or their old friends. Consider engaging in counseling if you and your child can't figure out the feelings and resolve them — a good counselor can let you know what will help your teen to feel more comfortable with the move (coming home on weekends, or not seeing you too often; getting a nudge to join a service or social fraternity or becoming involved in their religious organization). Thinking and talking about fears and concerns *ahead* of time will make the transition much more successful and pleasant.

Life skills and life lines

OK, so you have the list of what will be brought to school and what stays home. Next, it's time to make sure that your teenager has been taught some basic life skills. This doesn't necessarily mean that he will use these skills, but at least you've explained the procedure and will feel a tad less guilt should he fall on his face!

Before the big day, be sure that your child has done at least a load or two of laundry, including moving the wet stuff to the dryer part of the process. Consider a discussion of darks vs. lights, and mention the concept of bleach for the white socks and underclothes, but don't expect too much interest. Hey, it's his stuff and if he wants to wear pink T-shirts that's his problem! Most dorms have irons and ironing boards available in the office, so you may want to show the kid how to get out the wrinkles, but he probably won't be paying close attention. Consider purchasing a spray bottle of wrinkle releaser instead. For the really lazy and smelly kids, there are several products designed to cover up odors (on couches, carpets, etc.) but college kids will spray it on their clothes rather than hit the dorm laundromat. The laundromat is also a prime place to get stuff stolen, as many kids are not willing to sit through a complete wash and dry cycle to make sure that their clothing is not taken. Most just bring the laundry home on visits hoping that Mom or Dad will do it.

Will your teen be driving to school and keeping a car on campus? Be sure to run through the *basics* of car maintenance (and be brief — the eye-rolling begins after the first few sentences). Show how to check the air pressure in the tires (especially if the vehicle is an SUV), the oil level, and the radiator/coolant fluid level. Point out the dial or icon on the dashboard that shows whether the car is about to overheat and discuss what the child should do if that indicator moves toward the dangerous zone. Review how to deal with a flat tire (Change it? Use a fix-a-flat product? Call AAA?)

OK, next you need to discuss perhaps the hottest topic of all in terms of college prep: the budget. Rule No. 1: If your teen will be using a credit or debit card, get that established before leaving for school. And, be adamant that he or she is not to sign up for a new credit card. The charge card vultures will be lurking near favorite feeding holes on campus during the first few weeks, preying on unsuspecting freshman and offering free T-shirts, CDs and other “gifts” *just* to sign up for an account. Explain to your teen that she doesn’t need an additional card to “add” to her credit history, contrary to what the card company will proclaim. There will be plenty of time later in life to do that. Teach her to live on cash and to use her checkbook whenever possible. Also, explain how to balance a checkbook and how that must be done each month in order to avoid overdrawing her account and racking up a \$35 fee per bad check. Let her know that you are not going to foot the bill for bank fees that she could have avoided.

Set a budget, which is often easier said than done. Unless you’ve had an older child recently in residence at the same college by which to gauge expenses, you’ll do a lot of guessing at first. A good place to start is to purchase the school’s meal plan — at least the kid will be eating. Nutritious food is offered (if not taken advantage of) and that part of the budget will be accounted for. Also, consider funds needed for books, fees, video nights, shooting pool at the student union and pizza at midnight. Then, depending upon your child’s responsibility level and nature, decide whether she can handle being given the entire spending money for the semester at one time, or whether it should be deposited into her account on a monthly or weekly basis.

Finally, make sure that your kid has a cell phone with an updated calling plan. Be sure to check to see if it works well on the road to and from school as well as at the college — in the dorm room and on the walkways between classes. Decide whether it would be best for the cell phone’s home area to be based in your hometown, or whether it should be purchased at school, depending upon what would be more convenient for the student. Also discuss what you expect in terms of calls home per week, minutes to be used on a monthly basis or whether e-mail will be the primary communication device.

Getting to stay at college

Huh? Why would a parent want to bring up the *possibility* of the kid having to move back

home, even before school has begun? Well, because it happens, and it happens too frequently. I believe that one of the main reasons for college failure is lack of focus on the child's part. Kids need clear guidelines about what your expectations are, and without these being spelled out, disasters can occur. Sure, many college freshman are super-organized, focused and raring to hit the books. But just as many are immature, disorganized and ready to party. *Now*, not after a disastrous month or two, is the time to discuss your expectations with your child. I suggest that the following issues be covered:

- What grade point average needs to be *maintained* before the new student matures at the community college for a few semesters or years until he's ready to venture out again? Keep in mind that community colleges offer excellent educations and are usually less expensive. In addition, parents can offer more guidance and supervision if the teen is not ready to "do it on their own."
- What are your expectations about going to class and not lazing around the dorm room, sleeping in and hoping to catch the information from the roommate's notes or via video classes?
- How about drinking or even drug usage? Underage drinking is an all-too-common and socially acceptable college practice, but underage drinking is illegal, stupid, and can quickly get out of hand. Most of my clients who fall into this pattern begin to skip classes, get behind in their studies and withdraw from courses. A frank discussion of substance use will probably meet with eye-rolling, but it can't hurt to delve, again, into that area.
- How many credits must the student *complete* in the semester? Lots of freshmen register for 12 or 15 hours but drop to six or nine by the end of the semester. The expectation of the minimum number of credits completed per semester is an issue that should be addressed and agreed upon by both the parents and the student *before* the semester begins so that there are no ambiguities. Statistically, more college students take four and one-half to five years to complete their studies than the traditional four-year program — partly due to legitimate changes in the major area of study, but also due to too many wasted semesters when only six or nine hours of course work were actually completed.
- What should the student do if he or she finds that they are in over their head — either academically (grade or credit problems), socially (too many friends or parties), or emotionally (homesick, not enough friends, lonely)? The college counseling center is usually an excellent resource if the college student doesn't feel comfortable talking to Mom or Dad about these issues.

Tips for college success

A few years ago *Newsweek* offered the following information about successful students. Share these with your student — it may be an eye-opener for all of you!

- Students who engage in extracurricular activities are the happiest students as well as the most successful in the classroom. They seem to find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives.
- The most successful kids found “mentor professors” to work with during their tenure at school — this activity led to letters for job recommendations or future references, which become exceedingly important later in life.
- 70 to 75% of the students in the study felt that they needed more guidance on courses to take, extracurricular activities, and advice from administrators than they were receiving. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the oil!
- Time management is key. Kids are generally horrible at it, and the study showed that studying in a long uninterrupted block of time was much more effective than studying in short bursts.

Home for visits!

OK, so the kid packs up and moves to college, generally sticks to the budget, eats at least a few meals a day, and is making the grades. So far, so good. The next hurdle concerns the inevitable evolution of the parent-child relationship now that the child has “grown up.” Well, grown up in his mind, but perhaps not in yours. Remember, Junior will have been coming and going as he pleases by the time of his first visit home, and may balk at some of the old rules, curfews or restrictions. He thinks of himself as an adult, deserving of adult privileges, and hopefully he is. In a nutshell, he probably expects to come and go as he pleases at home just as he did at the dorm. Problem is that he’s had two to three months of “adult-like freedom” and 18-plus years of being your kid. The two often clash.

Some suggestions:

- *Be realistic about curfews.* To be fair, and to keep your sanity, you’re probably going to have to compromise. As long as he’s not breaking the law and is acting responsibly (not being in a car with someone who is drinking alcohol or using drugs, or noisily waking up the neighborhood at 2:00 a.m. when he does come home) you may want to consider letting him call the shots on curfew. See if it works, and if it’s within the realm of reasonable, go for it. If he’s disrupting the household or getting into trouble of course you’ll need to change the rules and lay down some stricter guidelines.
- *Be realistic about time spent with the family.* Face it, he’s not coming home *just* to see you. Trust me, I know. Former high school buddies are important to keep in touch with, and if they’re home he’ll want to be hanging around with them as well as visiting with the family. Suggest a compromise — how about dinners with the family and one evening on the weekend spent together, and the rest of the time is his to spend with friends or just to lay around in a bedroom larger than a cracker box.

- *Mind your manners.* Although you may want to personally escort your student back to the dorm, or run up the street waving goodbye as he drives off to return to school, try to keep it together. If not for you, then for him. The kid doesn't need to feel guilty about leaving home — he needs to focus upon his classes and the future that lies ahead.

By following these guidelines, you and your teenager will be better prepared for a pleasant and successful college experience. This should be one of the most exciting, challenging, and stimulating times of his or her life. By avoiding problems such as poor grades, financial disasters or emotional meltdowns, the teen will have a much greater chance of success in this new life chapter.

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