

# A Higher Education: 8 Steps to Prepare Your Teen for College

Your kids got their acceptance letters; congrats! Now it's time to ensure they're ready to be on their own. Use our guide to nurture their growing independence in the months before they leave home.

By Alison Goldman in *Family Circle*

After your teen's college acceptances arrive and the big where-to-go decision is made, there comes another important step in the off-to-school process. This is the one where, in the weeks and months before your teen leaves, you provide guidance on the basics of living away from home. Does she know how to do laundry? Or remember to lock the door behind her, for that matter? Whether your kid is super-excited, a little anxious, or even indifferent about being on her own, now is the time to help her be as ready as possible. Use our eight steps to build her self-sufficiency, right when she needs it most.

## 1. Money Matters

In a school setting, where late-night takeout and impulse shopping splurges might reign, your teen will be responsible for some spending decisions you used to make. The answer? A budget, says Tamsen Butler, author of *The Complete Guide to Personal Finance: For Teenagers and College Students* (Atlantic Publishing Group, Inc.) Sit down with your child and review his likely expenses and how much he'll have to put toward them. Then create a list of categories, like "Food," "Housing and Utilities" (if he's living off campus), "Transportation," "Entertainment," "School Fees," and maybe even "Savings," and allot a dollar amount to each. Remind your son to log his expenses regularly, and that a little deviation isn't necessarily a bad thing as long as he defaults back to the plan you've created together.

It's important to clearly establish how your teen will access his spending money. If you're contributing to his everyday funds, Butler recommends opening a joint savings or checking account so you both have access. Choose a bank with branches at home and on campus, or at least strong online access. Well before orientation, walk him through check-writing (have him write a few for you, that you then sign and send), depositing and withdrawing money, bill-paying, and keeping track of debit card expenditures. Finally, open a credit card in both his and your name, which will be for emergencies only, suggests Butler. Make sure you spell out what constitutes a need (yes to a tow if his car breaks down; no to a group snack attack) and that he understands that you'll be checking for unnecessary activity.

## 2. Chow Down Challenges

Arm your teen against the dreaded "freshman fifteen" by reinforcing healthy habits like a balanced diet and exercise. The weight issues often starts with how students schedule their eating, says Sarah Van Orman, MD, Executive Director of University Health Services at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Kids often skip healthy meals and then eat a lot at once at night or when they're studying." High-fat and high-sugar foods like pizza, chips, and candy don't just pack on pounds—they also affect mood and energy level, says Dr. Van Orman. Encourage your teen to eat within a couple of hours of getting up, and to visit the dining hall salad and fruit bar daily. Also encourage her to build in meal breaks when she

picks her course schedule. And when you put together care packages, forgo sweets (or at choose healthier versions like whole-grain cookies) and include light popcorn, instant oatmeal, dried fruit, and nuts instead.

### **3. Risky Business**

Ideally, you've been discussing your values and expectations about alcohol, drugs, and sex since at least middle school, says Janet E. Taylor, MD, a psychiatrist and member of the Family Circle Health Advisory Board. Still, now's a good time to reiterate your guidelines. These talks may always be awkward—and that's okay, says Dr. Taylor. One thing that might help the conversation along is to share personal stories—perhaps the time you refused to use a fake ID or nursed a friend who'd had too much to drink. "When parents share their own experiences or their anxiety, it makes them a little more human to kids," says Dr. Taylor. Finally, remind your kid to save emergency contacts—the college health center and campus police—in his phone. Let him know that even though he'll be more independent, he can always call home, no matter how sticky his situation.

### **4. R-E-S-P-E-C-T**

Your kid's definition of personal space will probably have to change on campus. "The majority of our students are used to having their own room, so this is the first time they're sharing space," says Diane Andrews, Senior Director of Residence Life at Pennsylvania State University. If your teen hasn't been doing it all along, remind her to keep her clothes off the floor, wash her sheets and towels regularly, dust and sweep, and take out garbage and recyclables. Discuss setting boundaries as well. It may have been okay for her to borrow her sister's clothes or DVDs without asking, but that probably won't work with a new roommate. Ideally, your teen will be paired with someone who has similar tastes and habits, but if she's into punk and her roomie is all about classical, the two may have to work out compromises. Ditto guests in the room, and ideal lights-out times.

### **5. Laundry Laws**

Some teens have been doing wash since they could reach the knobs on the machine. If your teen isn't among them, give him a crash course in darks, whites, hand-washing, folding, and stain removal methods. Simple fix-up skills, like sewing on a button or mending a hole, will also come in handy. You can purchase a miniature sewing kit or make one by packaging needles, small scissors, and spools of thread in a few basic colors like black, white, gray, blue, and red. As an added bonus, send your teen off to school with wrinkle remover spray.

### **6. Health Care**

When your kid gets sick at school, you won't be there to nurse her back to health. That means she needs to know when to call the health center, where it is, and how it works. These specifics vary from college to college, says Dr. Van Orman, so sit down with your teen and visit the center's website.

Look into health insurance early. First determine what's available and covered on campus—college and university health centers vary in the scope of the medical problems they treat. (The information should be in your student's orientation pack; if it isn't, contact the admissions office.) Some services may be covered by tuition or a prepaid fee, while others may be out-of-pocket or have to go to your insurance. You also might want to research which doctors' practices near the school offer what the college doesn't or that insurance won't cover at the health center. Dr. Van Orman says she often sees students who only have coverage for local emergency care and must delay other treatment or travel home for it.

If your child takes regular meds and will be in charge for the first time, there's no time like the present to let her take over. Explain the importance of setting up regular habits and keeping the medication in a safe, secure location that's easy to remember and access. If your teen doesn't already schedule doctor's appointments or fill prescriptions on her own, explain the basics (and have her make appointments or go to the drugstore herself if it comes up) and remind her to always carry her insurance card.

While you may not want to even think about emergencies, you must prepare your teen for worst-case scenarios. She should have important numbers, like the campus police, her Residence Assistant, the health center, and any trusted adults who live nearby, in her cell phone. Stock your teen with a simple first aid kit—thermometer, bandages, antibiotic ointment, ibuprofen or acetaminophen—for not-so-serious illnesses and scrapes

## **7. Organization 101**

Kids who struggle to stay in college usually aren't having problems with academics but with time management, say admissions officials. "In high school, everything is pretty much scripted for you," says Dr. Taylor. "If you deviate, there are consequences. In college, people don't care if you don't go to classes—you just won't get a good grade." Your teen needs explicit study time, downtime, and sleep time in order to succeed, and scheduling is crucial. Suggest your child devise a way to make and manage a to-do list and calendar. And Dr. Taylor recommends suggesting your teen pick course times that work with his known strengths and habits. If he's not a morning person, for example, encourage him to pick classes that start at 10 a.m. or later. If he needs a huge chunk of study time or needs to work a job, maybe he should keep Fridays free.

## **8. Now You**

Your student is good to go, but are you? Sending a kid off to college is a transition for parents, too, and you should be prepared for a mixed bag of emotions, says Dr. Taylor. It's a sort of loss, but it's also an opportunity. You may be anxious about how he'll do, but simultaneously grateful for more time with younger kids and your husband. The one thing you must do, says Dr. Taylor, is resist the desire to intervene with your teen's new life. The urge to get in there and fix things may build, she says. "But rather than jump in and take over when there's a problem, maybe focus on listening and giving just a couple of suggestions. Let your child work it out." And don't call or text every day, edit his papers, call up troublesome professors, or otherwise micromanage. He needs practice taking the lead. In your advisory capacity, the ideal amount of contact is probably once or twice a week max, though this may vary with

personalities and circumstances. Finally, this is the time to let go and start remembering who you were before you had kids. You may not want to turn his room into a den, but you could certainly set up your yoga mat or crafting table in there, at least until he comes home