

Successfully Launching an Independent Young Adult

The trajectory of the teenage years is a process of moving toward independence. Teens grow increasingly independent, disconnected from their parents, and become their own persons. This “launching” is never completely smooth; in fact, conflict is a necessary part of the separation process. This isn’t easy. It’s hard to let go and watch your child embark on their own life and it is challenging for teens to begin to be independent, to make decisions and act for themselves, and not to rely on parents for everything. However, there is much that you can do as a parent to facilitate your teen’s take-off and help them launch successfully. By acknowledging the milestones, you are recognizing that the time is coming. At the same time, you’re helping them to check off the skills necessary for living a successful adult life.

This process is normal, natural and necessary. Fight it and you'll lose. The solution is to work with it as well as you can — by understanding what's yours to control and what isn't.

Doing your own laundry, making decisions about healthy eating, figuring how to get stuff done are all steps along the way. Fighting boredom, sorting out conflict with peers, tolerating discomfort, finding solutions to problems are all skills that are essential to coping with life as an adult. So much in our culture makes it hard for children to develop these skills – helicopter parenting, the explosion in technology, so much structured play and activity and simply the amount of time parents spends on “parenting” are all contributing factors.

[Insert info from unhealthy caretaking cycle and setting the table slides](#)

A caterpillar struggles to break from its cocoon – teenager sympathizes. However, if you were to cut it free prematurely, it would not survive. It needs to develop the strength it takes to break out of the cocoon in

order to survive in the natural world. Similarly, children need to develop the skills, overcome struggles, and see others' trust in them in order to develop their abilities to succeed. Home should be nurturing and protective but also offer reasonable obstacles to allow children to struggle and gain strength.

If you allow natural consequences to take their course, your teen will inevitably feel some pain. Your role is not to shield them from the consequences of their actions and decisions; rather you

BIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

- Naturally occurring
- If you don't bathe, you itch
- If you don't eat, you're hungry
- If you go out without a coat, you are cold
- If you don't sleep, you become tired

FAMILY CONSEQUENCES

- Only implement when none comes from other sources
- If you misuse a privilege, you lose it and must demonstrate respect for that privilege to get it back
- Same principle as time out for younger kids
- If you misuse the computer, you must demonstrate proper use of it
- If you mistreat a family member, you must engage in an activity with them, and act like a best friend

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

- Neglect of responsibilities to school, work, or friends
- Consequences usually include rejection or failure
- If you don't do your homework, you won't pass the class
- If you don't work/do chores, you won't have money

Teens should earn what they want with demonstration of their abilities. For example, your daughter wants a new guitar. She needs to show a willingness to practice and to do some work to earn the instrument. Challenges should strengthen the child's abilities to follow her dreams.

Initiative must come from the child. The cocoon of home must challenge a child's weaknesses and emphasize her abilities. The goal is to have young people pursue their interests yet experience reasonable consequences.

Sometimes parents vacillate between holding tight reins on behavior and using coercive methods to limit autonomy, and stepping back and allowing complete freedom and excessive leniency. You want to establish a reasonable degree of authority – teens still need a sense that there are boundaries and limits in their lives – and at the same time allow them the space to develop their independence.

As a parent, you need to be able to recognize and allow normal adolescent behavior, while identifying and addressing those behaviors that are linked to severe dysfunction or negative consequences. You don't want to foster dependence by keeping your teen from their natural movement toward autonomy. Excessive caretaking leaves your teen unprepared to negotiate the world on their own.

At the other extreme, forcing autonomy, prematurely thrusting the adolescent toward separation and greater self-sufficiency before they are ready, is a recipe for failure that can undermine your teen's self-confidence and willingness to take the necessary risks towards independence. This premature "push" toward independence, may be a result of frustration, giving up, feeling exasperated or burned out.

When you're trying to break out of the habit of solving your teen's problems, you need to find the balance between clinging or stifling caretaking and pushing your teen away too soon. This should be an ongoing conversation with your teen. The goal is find a balance between your child learning how to negotiate their environment with you modifying the environment for him. Problem solve with him to find ways for him to ensure that take ownership for himself that takes you

out of the equation. This ranges from helping him figure out how to get to school with all of his homework and lunch to turning in a major school project on time. At the start of this journey, your teen will be working on getting the simple stuff right and over time, building to more complex and significant accomplishments. (Check out the Taking Action section of our website for practical suggestions.)

There are going to be bumps along this path. As hard as it may be, realize that experimenting with drugs, alcohol & sexuality; changing goals or self-image; frequent break-ups of romantic relationships, interpersonal conflicts – especially with parents; moodiness does not mean that your teen has a mental health issue. However, if such behavior results in self-harm, hospitalization, school avoidance, or other life-threatening or severe quality-of-life impairing consequences, there may be a more serious issue and you should consult a health care professional.

Be aware of offering guidance before your teen asks for it. If there is an issue or problem to discuss, think about the language you use. Ask open-ended questions where your teen comes up with alternatives and possible solutions. Help your teen think through the steps to take or the possible consequences. Your role is to provide advice and direction but your teen should come up with the solution. Afterwards revisit the decision. Ask: How did it go? Would you do it differently next time? What problems did you have? What help do you need? You are teaching them how to learn from their experiences and to avoid making the same mistake multiple times as well as identifying what works well for them.

Just as it is difficult to be in the passenger seat when your teen is first driving and you find yourself pressing an imaginary brake pedal, letting your teen problem solve independently can be a challenge. In the end though, it is satisfying to see your teen begin to successfully navigate

life's challenges.

TAKING ACTION

While going to college is, for many teens, the big transition to independence, it isn't the only one. When adolescents turns 18, they legally become adults. Before your child reaches that milestone, use this checklist of life skills to help them become confidently independent and to have a positive sense of competency in coping with routine life challenges.

1. Make a meal and clean up afterwards
2. Wake themselves up on time
3. Do laundry from sorting to folding and putting it away
4. Pump gas, even better, know what to do if they're in a car accident
5. Pitch in, best: without being asked; second best: only have to be asked once!
6. Advocate for themselves -- coach them the first time
7. Pack their own bags
8. Order and pay at a restaurant
9. Talk to strangers, including: asking directions, clerks and cashiers in stores, at the bank
10. Go grocery shopping
11. Plan an outing
12. Take public transportation including buying the tickets and navigating the system
13. Online finance skills: how to use online services and understanding keeping personal data secure
14. Make a medical appointment, pick up prescription at the pharmacy, call health insurance company with question or to find a doctor
15. Know what to do if they're in a car accident

Even if your child is still in elementary school, check out ["12 Basic Life Skills Every Kid Should Know by High School"](http://www.parenting.com/child/child-development/12-basic-life-skills-every-kid-should-know-high-school). This is a helpful list for figuring out what to expect from your growing child. Think about how you can help your child master these life skills.

(<http://www.parenting.com/child/child-development/12-basic-life-skills-every-kid-should-know-high-school>).

Teens Taking Responsibility for Themselves

Give your college-bound teen the link to CDC's webpage (College **Health and Safety**: <https://www.cdc.gov/family/college/>), which addresses these and other issues:

There are all kinds of tests in college--beyond those you take for a grade.

- Social and sexual pressures.
- The temptation of readily available alcohol, drugs, and unhealthy food.
- The challenge of getting enough sleep.

- Stress from trying to balance classes, friends, homework, jobs, athletics, and leadership positions.

One way you can do this is to have them add it to the contacts list in their phone.

They're leaving home in a few weeks...Worried that you've forgotten something? This checklist is a useful reminder:

- Make a plan – what do they do if they get sick?
- Make a contract – if you're paying, what are your requirements? Have your teen sign consent for you to get grade reports
- Nuts and bolts – do they know how to do laundry?
- What supports did they have in High School that will disappear?
- Do they need to register with the Office of Students with Disabilities?
- Create a budget together; identify who is responsible for which expenses
- How will they choose classes? Plan their schedule?
- What should they do if they feel homesick?

[Post-high school life that doesn't involve SAT prep, college applications, or a focus on grades?](#)
[How to support your teen for a successful post-high school launch?](#)

FURTHER READING

Watch the Julie Lythcott Haims' TEDTalk [*How to Raise Kids Without Over Parenting*](#)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/julie_lythcott_haims_how_to_raise_successful_kids_without_over_pa](https://www.ted.com/talks/julie_lythcott_haims_how_to_raise_successful_kids_without_over_parenting)
renting and check out her book [**How to Raise An Adult**](#)
(<https://www.julielythcotthaims.com/how-to-raise-an-adult/>)

[**Grown and Flown: Parenting Never Ends**](#) (<https://grownandflown.com/>) is a website for parenting teens and young adults from high school through the college years.

It's not too early to start practicing:

The Six Things You Shouldn't Say to Your Adult Child

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/adult-children-parenting_n_1916536.html

The following articles are geared to parents getting ready to send their child off to college.

How to have the pre-college conversation before you're in the car driving them there. *Launching Conversations: Tips for Parents of College Bound Kids*

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-price-tillman/launching-conversations-t b 694622.html>

Letting go: Tips for Parents of New College Students

<http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/letting-go-new-college-students/>

Launching your College Student

www.northshorecenterllc.com/userfiles/229143/file/Launchingyourcollegestudent.pdf

Feeling melancholy about your child going off to college?

Struggling to Let Go of My College-Student Daughter

<https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/01/struggling-to-let-go-of-my-college-student-daughter/>