

Summer Countdown to College Blast-Off

The summer before starting college is a time of transition for recent high school graduates, but before long the summer will have flown by and you'll be packing the car to move your college freshman into the dorm.

To help ensure a successful launch, you should begin laying the groundwork now. Unlike in high school, summer work isn't about reading 3 or 4 books, it's about life skills and some serious conversations.

Start with the basics but don't stop there.

1. Laundry: make your teen do their own, from stripping their bed and throwing in the towels to sorting their clothes. Don't take it from granted that they know how often they need to change the sheets, or how much laundry can go into the machine at once and how much detergent to use. It may seem obvious, but remind them not to leave wet clothes in the washer (mentioning laundry room etiquette isn't a bad idea either and can be a helpful segue to a conversation about adjusting to living in a communal setting).
2. Housekeeping: if your teen isn't already helping around the house with housekeeping, a few practical lessons like sweeping the dust balls out from under the bed, sewing buttons back onto shirts, advice about making sure that food left in the fridge isn't a science experiment and keeping a box of baking soda in the fridge to absorb odors. Don't just talk, enlist them in housekeeping at home now if they don't help out already.
3. Transportation: while your teen may know how to get into New York City and navigate the subway, they may not know ways of getting home from campus. Review the options and their costs. Hint: if coming home for Thanksgiving requires flying or taking the train, **buy the tickets now**. Make a hotel reservation for Parents Week-end now too --- if you decide not to go, you'll have plenty of time to cancel. Don't freak out, but some parents make reservations for graduation now too!

If your child will have a car on campus, open the hood and review basic maintenance like checking the oil and other fluids, knowing where to go for service, and how to get help – walk them through calling AAA or the insurance company.

4. Budgeting is a big issue. While the college's meal plan may in theory cover most meals, your child will have other expenses. You'll have to do some homework, but come up with a realistic amount for your child to manage and how much you will contribute. Talk about how to handle academic related expenses like books and materials, meals and entertainment, travel and unexpected expenses.

If your child doesn't already have a checking account, open one now (assuming that they'll be able to access their bank easily from campus). They'll

need to know how to write a check, send a payment electronically, know what ATM and other fees they'll pay in various circumstances, and how to bank online securely. If you're giving them a credit card, make the parameters for using the card are clear.

Include cell phone and data plans in this conversation, how much data they can use and how to manage their usage – reminding them to limit social media apps to Wi-Fi is one easy to rein in data consumption.

5. Health care: don't leave doctors' appointment and health forms for the last moment. If your child will be on your family's health insurance at college, be sure the waiver form is sent in so you don't get billed for the college's plan. Be sure that your student goes to school with their own insurance card and know how the plan works (For example: is there a deductible? If they don't feel well, where should they go for care; what to do in an emergency.) Ask them to sign a HIPA release form at the doctor's office so that you can interact with the doctor on their behalf.

Make sure they know how to get help if they're in distress. Starting college can be an emotionally volatile experience and your child needs to know that you back them 100%. Many 18 year olds go to college feel that if they stumble, they have failed; they need to know that they will stumble and that reaching out for support is a sign of success. For mental health, this support ranges from the RA in their dorm to the college's counseling service, with hotlines and other services in between.

Academic support services at college aren't just for students with special needs. Most colleges have resources to help with writing papers and working out math problem sets as well as faculty advisors who help map out your child's academic progress. Review all the available resources together, consider making a cheat sheet for yourself so that you can make helpful suggestions when that tearful call comes. Know the college's policy and procedure for communicating with parents, but if you are truly worried about your child, you should not hesitate to contact the college.

Your college student needs to know that it is ok to be a squeaky wheel. Not addressing a concern, whether emotional, physical, academic or social is not a sign of maturity. Using available resources is.

6. Consider making a contract with your student about their obligations. You and your child need to agree on academic expectations (GPA, number of credits that have to be earned in a semester). Consider asking your child to sign a release allowing you to see their grades and transcripts. When you have this conversation, remember that some students do struggle to adjust to college and it takes them some time to get find their academic footing; make sure your expectations are mindful of this; the last thing you want is for your child to be worried about what you are going to say if they are doing their best and they are struggling. You should have the same conversation for illicit substances. Talk through the consequences for drinking and drug use (including casual marijuana).

7. Social and sexual pressures. There have been plenty of headlines about sexual assault on college campuses. Make sure you sit down and talk with your child about these issues and how connected they are to drinking. You may feel that you sound like a broken record, but the message that alcohol abuse has serious consequences is essential. Make sure your child knows how to take care of themselves and to look out for their friends. Talk through scenarios of what to do when handed a drink at a party or if a friend has had too much to drink; it's not a bad idea to describe the symptoms of alcohol poisoning. It's not uncommon to find a fellow student passed out in the hall of the dorm. It's not a bad idea to describe the symptoms and consequences of alcohol poisoning as it is not uncommon to find a fellow student passed out in the hall of the dorm. Don't skip this conversation if your teen has never been interested in engaging in these behaviors in high school. Even if they will be living in the substance-free dorm they need this information.
8. Encourage participation in an extra-curricular activity. It's a way to meet people somewhere other than at parties; having a non-academic interest is a kind of safety valve that builds a social network and can help keep academic pressure in perspective. Exercise – even if it is playing Quidditch – and some kind of mindfulness practice are other important tools for scaffolding success at college.
9. Make a plan for communicating with your child when they are at college. Plan to communicate reactively – don't start your day by texting “just to say hi.” Let your child establish the rhythm for communicating with you, but set up a regular time once a week to check in. Once they're at school, resist the temptation to call just to hear their voice. Before you wave good bye at the dorm in September, work out how you will communicate that you need a response from them and what are your agreed expectations. Care packages are always welcome, be they a batch of chocolate chip cookies, a gift card or a framed photo of a favorite photo of you together when they were little. Letting go isn't easy, but an easy way to avoid being a helicopter parent by being reactive in communicating with your child, especially at the beginning of the Fall semester. However, you know your child best and if you sense that there are warning signs that something is seriously not right, trust your instincts.

This list could go on, issues like time management, finding a mentor and many others, but at some point, your child is going to turn off. Don't make this a marathon session. Don't start with a long conversation, begin with the building blocks of independence like sending them to the doctor's appointment alone (if they are over 18), or having them make a budget for what they want in their dorm room and letting them loose to fill up a cart on the Bath, Bed and Beyond website. Make your own list of what issues you want to cover before the car gets loaded up at the end of the summer. Put what is most important to you and your family at the top and start your first conversation, maybe when you're helping them sort their own laundry.

Lastly, savor this last summer with them home, in a flash it will be over and like the milestones of their first words, riding a 2-wheeled bike, and graduating from high school, this time will be a memory. Enjoy it and use it to ensure that your college student has a full tool-box for college success.

Taking Action

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.

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?

Make time for family fun:

Cook together their favorite recipes, especially the easy ones that they can reproduce in their dorm's kitchen to wow their roommates. Make index card copies of the recipes and an online version that you can send to them later in the year.

Sit down together to make a photobook online and order 2 copies, one for you at home and one to send with them to college.

Make plans to check something off of your child's bucket list before they leave for school. If the whole family can participate, even better.

Further Reading

Additional suggestions for 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/>

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