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Editors' Comment

As teens graduate from high school and enter a new stage in their personal, social, and academic lives, parents continue to play an important, although different, role in their lives. The characteristics that parents have instilled in their children in their formative years – a sense of discipline, ability to face new challenges, and a growing sense of independence – now form the basis on which parents assume a new role – that of consultant. In this position, parents can anticipate situations in which their advice and guidelines would be useful as their teens move on. A general guiding principle is to respect your teen's independence and be supportive, but at a distance. Let your child know you're there if needed.

In this issue of the CSC Letter, Dr. Richard Gallagher, Director of the Parenting Institute of the NYU Child Study Center, reviews some major issues involved in helping teens successfully meet the challenges of their college years. He discusses ways in which parents can prepare students to face new tasks: accommodating to the latest phase in the parent/teen interaction, adapting to the demands of a new and diverse environment, establishing new modes of communication, and making important decisions involving friendships, sexual relationships, and exposure to substance abuse. Helping teens develop a realistic balance of work, study, and social lives is also discussed. Dr. Gallagher stresses the importance of life skills such as the ability to delay gratification and to independently identify problems and generate potential solutions, and he presents strategies to strengthen these skills.

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The Late Teen Years: Meeting the Challenges of College

Introduction

Parents can make a difference in their child's late teen years, just as in other stages of their child's life. Studies on the impact of parenting practices suggest that effective parents follow four basic principles: 1) Effective parents take actions that establish and maintain a positive relationship with their children. 2) Effective parents balance the positive contacts by providing effective guidance and using appropriate discipline with their children. 3) Effective parents have a good grasp of the challenges that children and teens encounter during a phase of development. 4) Effective parents help their children obtain skills to address the challenges that they will face. From infancy through young adulthood, parents that follow all four principles have children that are better adjusted, happier, and more successful in social, emotional, and learning endeavors.

Thoughtful parents can use these four basic principles to guide their actions at the end of their child's teen years as well as in earlier stages. As children move on to college, parents can provide assistance even in the face of the typical nervousness, concerns about loneliness and homesickness, and new freedoms and responsibilities. When teens are getting ready to leave home for extended periods of time parents can take steps that will make their experience much more fulfilling and successful.

Let's address some of the major issues to help you prepare and, in turn, help your child prepare for the college years.

Applying Principle 1

Establishing and Maintaining a Positive Relationship

To maintain a positive relationship with a college-aged child leaving home, parents have to be supportive, but at a distance. Teens want to be independent; they do not want parents to be concerned with all of the details of their lives. Stay close through talking; ask if your teen is ready to listen to some advice or ideas, but keep your own urge to talk, see the teen, or send a note in reasonable check. Teens are likely to retreat if parents demand frequent contacts in repeated, lengthy conversations about serious topics. In fact, parents can ask teens to let them know if they are feeling smothered or annoyed by the contact. Honest discussion of these concerns will help establish comfortable boundaries and foster closeness.

Stay in touch. Communication is an essential component in maintaining a positive relationship. As a family you need to consider how often and with what method you are going to communicate. In addition to cell phones and land lines, contact through e-mail accounts, instant messages, voice mail, and sometimes video chats are options to be considered. Negotiate the ways and the frequency with which you are going to communicate before school starts. Establish a system that allows you and your child to be in touch about routine as well as times when questions need to be answered



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or concerns have to be addressed. Emergency contact methods also have to be worked out.

Agreement should be reached about the frequency of contact, the reasons for contact, who initiates contact, and when someone has to return a contact. Parents often find themselves chasing their children, trying to get them to call back. Having a set time for contact on an agreed-upon schedule helps reduce that problem. As students and parents are adjusting to the new situation, contact every other day may be appropriate, but after the first few weeks, contact twice a week is probably more realistic.

As you negotiate these plans, remember that you and your children are navigating a new phase in your relationship. Your child will need some times alone to establish new relationships and a new schedule for school and leisure pursuits. Parents need to get used to the idea that they are no longer going to be involved in their child's daily experiences as they were before. As a result, you may find yourself feeling lonely, worried, and underutilized. Be careful not to respond to these feelings by getting on the phone or leaving a voice mail or e-mail. Although you may believe that the way to handle these feelings is to reach out to your child, that may not be the best way in the long run. As you and your child are confronted with this new developmental challenge, you both need as many resources and as much time as possible to develop skills for managing that challenge. Find other ways to reassure yourself that your child is most likely doing fine and to reduce your own feelings of loneliness. In that way, you'll grow into an effective parent who can be an adviser to your child, and who is able to see him stumble and grow. Older kids who are away from home for extended periods of time or are establishing new homes need time to work on their feelings of loneliness and develop their new social network and friendships. Overly frequent contacts from their parents may leave them less effective in confronting these new challenges. Remember that most people

are extremely capable and adaptable. Millions of parents and kids have met this challenge before. There is no reason to believe that millions more, including you and your child, will not be able to meet it as well.

Applying Principle 2

Guidance and Discipline for Starting the College Years

Parents have to shift into a consultant role. You will not have the day-to-day supervision that you may have had when your older teens were at home. You can state your ideas on curfew, which television shows, movies, and computer sites they view, and who they spend time with, but teens will really be making their own decisions about these topics. In this new position, present advice and guidelines while hoping that your teens will heed that advice and consider the values that you wish them to follow. For beginning college life, we suggest talks and discussions in four major areas before you drop your student off at orientation: (1) relationships with others, including sexual relationships; (2) exposure to substances, especially alcohol; (3) balancing leisure with needed study and work; and, (4) keeping healthy in a new setting.

- **Help teens prepare for new relationships.** Help them recognize that they are going to encounter people that they like and dislike – other students as well as faculty and staff members – probably very similar to their experiences in high school. However, since they are now going to be living with some of these people, they should realize that they will have to know when to tolerate disliked people and when they should change the contact with those people. For example, they should expect that they might have some conflicts with roommates, but they should try to establish a means to overcome them. Good assertiveness and negotiation skills can be valuable and both set of skills should be discussed. You should also let your teen know that

he or she should reach out for some help if major problems in connecting with people emerge, if they experience anxiety about social contacts, persistent homesickness, and excessive longing for family and old friends. Of course, your teen should know to expect some homesickness, but she or he should also know that lasting discomfort in the new setting and persistent longing for previous contacts should be reviewed.

• **Sexual relationships, both serious and casual, are common in college settings.** Sexual relationships are readily available in most college situations. Teens are often living together at close quarters, sexual impulses are often hitting their peaks, and people are sharing many intense experiences without any real supervision. Under these circumstances, sexually mature teens often get involved in sexual activity. Provide guidelines on how you expect your teen to behave. Consider asking a number of questions and discussing the answers:

- What are the qualities of a relationship in which sexual activity is appropriate? Do you think it is appropriate or satisfying in casual dating contacts? Does the idea of “friends with benefits” make sense to you? Should sexual activity be reserved for marriage? For serious, long-term relationships? You need to decide what your values are and what you believe your teen should follow.
- If you wish your teen to remain abstinent, make that clear, but also help him or her find a way to follow that path. It is not easy in a college setting, and having a plan for how to remain socially active while also abstinent may be of help.
- If you expect that your teen will be sexually active, ask this question too: How should potential sexual partners negotiate contact? Partners should consider the

meaning of a sexual relationship and what it means for the relationship. Helping your teen think about these issues can help avoid conflict and awkward interactions that happen when the partners had different impressions about the meaning of the sexual contact.

- Additionally, being smart enough to get into college does not guarantee that a person is smart enough to engage in safer sex practices. Many people fail to take the steps to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. Firm demands that you want your teens to use these practices at all times of genital contact (even oral-genital contact) can reduce the risks they will take.
- **Substance use in college is a major problem that affects a large number of students.**
 - Conversations about substance should be held throughout a student’s career, but especially before the start of the freshman year. Prohibitions against illegal drug use should be made indicating the potential consequences for health, legal, and educational problems. Make honest statements about the college’s policy on drug use, which often includes expulsion for repeated episodes. Although parents may believe that these talks have no impact on older teens, they actually significantly reduce the likelihood of use by college students.
 - Advice and guidelines on alcohol use are also crucial. Help teens know their risk for problems in managing alcohol in families with a history of alcohol use and addiction problems. For other teens, full discussions of the risks of alcohol use should be fostered. Most colleges have educational materials that parents can use to begin these discussions. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the Centers for Disease Control provide detailed information and guides on how to hold conversations with teens. One important step, even in the light of the statistics

above, is to remind teens that most students do NOT engage in binge drinking. Despite scenes in movies and folklore, the majority of college students does not engage in uncontrolled parties and avoids binge drinking. Just making it clear what is typical helps students avoid excess in order to simply keep up with others.

Facts About Alcohol

Illegal drug use and misuse of prescription drugs are commonly encountered, while alcohol misuse is the most prevalent concern.

Before the legal age of 21 for any alcohol use, many students are involved in regular use that ranges from small amounts to binge drinking. After the age of 21, the range of use is quite wide, ranging from responsible, social drinking to excessive drinking that can include binge drinking, which has a peak level of 48% of students reporting binges during their 21st year. This level of drinking differs between men and women, but is approximately 4 to 5 drinks in a span of less than 2 hours. Injuries and potential injuries are prevalent. More than 1700 unintentional fatalities due to alcohol use were reported in college students in 2001 while 2.8 million college students reported driving with someone who they knew was under the influence of alcohol.

Less potentially deadly problems are also frequent with over 18 percent of college students who suffer from clinically significant alcohol problems. These problems include dependence and addiction. At another level, arguments, fights, dangerous but daring acts, and thoughtless sexual activity are also encountered with all of their unpleasant consequences. Clearly, alcohol use interferes with studying and, at high levels of use, interferes with concentration, memory, and speed of thought.

- Describe the slow, but steady impact of excess alcohol use to teens to prevent them from thinking that alcohol is safe. Describe what you think is appropriate use of alcohol; help your teen know how to set limits on its use during any one episode and how to recognize negative effects in the short and long run. The conversation can be aimed at helping your teen know what to do for safe use and how to tune into signals that use is getting out of control.

- **Balancing work, study, and leisure.** Many college students will be working to manage their living expenses and help with the cost of college. Both working and non-working students have to establish a balanced schedule of study and leisure pursuits that allows them to learn and also to take breaks to let their minds and bodies relax and refresh. College is actually very different from most other life situations. Unlike most high schools, college students do not always have to attend classes, no one keeps track of them, and assignments are usually not required. Unlike most work schedules, college students do not have to report to a supervisor. In effect, college students have an unusual amount of freedom that may be problematic for them. Each year, a number of students fail classes, are placed on probation, or are asked to leave schools because they did not manage their schedules well. Having discussions on how your teen plans to establish a study schedule and what limits will be placed on leisure hours is essential. Agree on how you will review modifications and decide how you will determine if your teen is adhering to a reasonable schedule so that you can bring up any concerns in phone and other contacts.

- **Maintaining health in a new setting should be addressed in another talk.** Unlike most high schools, colleges do not have scheduled physical education classes. Although this may seem trivial, one

contributor to the “freshman fifteen” weight gain may be lack of physical education classes. Additionally, your teen will probably have a choice of foods and amounts, which may be very different from high school. So, some discussion about having an exercise plan and basic ideas on nutrition should be reviewed so your teen makes healthy choices and uses healthy practices.

Applying Principle 3 Understanding the Challenges of this New Phase of Development

In addition to the challenges discussed above, parents should consider possible problems in the realm of mental health.

- College students often get overwhelmed by the multiple and simultaneous demands of managing loss of close contacts with family and old friends, new living arrangements, new friendships, and intense study. They may be reluctant to report those feelings to parents wishing to show their independence, but parents should ask their teens to be open about their experiences and agree to keep them posted if they are not functioning well.

- Recent surveys indicate that up to 50% of college students report that they have experienced episodes in which they have been unable to function. Some of these students experience depression, with the rates of serious cases being as high as 15-20% at any one time. Many of these episodes go unreported by the college students, but hinder their performance and social functioning. Again, parents should make their teens aware of these possibilities, especially if there is a family history of depression, and help them know the signs of depression.

- Eating disorders are fairly common in college women. It has been shown that addressing healthy attitudes about appearance, weight, and eating may be necessary for up to 15% of college women. Contact with the student’s physician is a good means of developing a plan if this emerges.

- During the college years a small number of students develop psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia, which can emerge during the young adult years. A gradual, but dramatic change in thinking and interpretation of events occurs and should be monitored. It is especially important to keep on guard for this problem in students with an extended family history of serious mental illnesses.

- Sources for further information on these challenges include the college counseling center, other articles on AboutOurKids.org, the websites for the American Psychological Association and American Psychiatric Association, and college advisors or resident hall assistants.

Applying Principle 4 Skills Development and College Life

Many skills that parents need to consider for their college-bound teens should already be in place. Some practical skills to think about may include doing laundry, managing money and budgeting expenses, knowing enough about nutrition to avoid the “freshman fifteen”, and how to organize your room. However, two more general skills seem essential.

- **The ability to independently consider problems and generate potential solutions is an invaluable skill.** This skill can help teens make good decisions about relationships and actions with friends and acquaintances, including sexual activity and substance use. It can also facilitate study decisions and how to achieve a balance of fun and work. Concisely described, teens should learn a process of (1) recognizing problems, (2) stopping to think before acting, (3) generating a number of alternative solutions, (4) analyzing the likely impact of the alternative solutions, and, (5) choosing the alternative that seems likely to have the best outcome. With practice, a teen can use this method quickly to think on his or her feet and respond thoughtfully instead of impulsively.

• **The second essential skill is the capacity to delay gratification and provide self-discipline.** College life can be full of many temptations which can pull a student, even with the best intentions, away from needed study. The capacities to delay gratification and give oneself a pep talk or stern reprimand to stay on track are critical abilities that have predicted life success in numerous studies. Parents can help their teens recognize how likely they are to succumb to temptation and help them consider methods to remain seriously involved in academic activity. A frank discussion of the methods that can be used to keep up to date on assignments, to prepare for exams, and to gather data and produce information for papers and projects can go far in preparing your student for the greater independence and greater demands of college education. If your student honestly indicates that he or she is poor at avoiding distractions, a consultation with an academic advisor or even the college student support office, such as the office to aid disabled students, may prove helpful in getting some advice and assistance on improving study habits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the college experience is an exciting time that is full of potential for fun, fulfillment, and growth for both teens and parents. For the teens, they may be headed for one of the best experiences in their lives. For parents, they can look forward to watching from a distance as their children grow into mature, educated adults who become very interesting companions on visits and future contacts. Applying the principles described here may get the experiences off to the right start for both parents and children.

About the Author

Richard Gallagher, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Director of the Parenting Institute, and Director of Special Projects at the Institute for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Behavior Disorders at the NYU Child Study Center.