

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids: A Letter for Parents by the NYU Child Study Center

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HELPING YOUR COLLEGE-BOUND CHILDREN: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Leaving for college is a major transition for both the teenager and the entire family. Some children may live at home or attend school nearby, whereas others may be relocating to different parts of the country. Regardless, going to college symbolizes that teenagers are separating from their parents and moving into adulthood. The transition to college, no matter how exciting, can also bring up feelings of sadness, loss, and concern to parents and children. Both children and parents may also have difficulty letting go, even though they are excited about the future. The following are some specific guidelines on preparing adolescents and their parents for college life.

Tips for Parents with Adolescents Preparing for College

- **Talk to your teenager.** Openly discuss any concerns and fears your college student has before leaving for college. Talk about your adolescent's thoughts and feelings regarding leaving the comfort and familiarity of school, friends, and routines. It is also important to express your expectations related to academic achievement, financial responsibility, safety precautions, and any other concerns with your child.
- **Educate.** Your teenager is likely to face increased social pressures in college, with less adult supervision. Talk to your adolescent in advance about sex, drugs, and alcohol on campus and explain the consequences of risk-taking behaviors. Discuss ways in which your child can ensure his/her safety while fully experiencing college life.
- **Provide reassurance.** Your adolescent may be concerned about how the family will function in his or her absence. Assure your child that although he/she will be greatly missed, both you and other family members will be okay. Express excitement and support for your college student in this important life transition.
- **Engage in open communication.** It is important to create an environment in which your child feels supported and listened to. Show your child that you understand how he/she is feeling and that he/she is being heard. For example, you can say: "I can see that you are nervous about leaving for school."
- **Be proactive.** Create a safety plan with your college student for the rare case of an emergency. Help your child create a list of emergency contacts and nearby supports. Identify family members or friends who live closer to the college campus. Set up a plan for your college student to be able to return home in case of an emergency.
- **Make sure your child knows that help is always available.** If your child has a specific need, inquire about available resources on the college campus and/or surrounding town/city. Be sure to include your college student in the decisions made regarding his/her treatment and special accommodations.

Tips for Your Child's First Year in College

- **Strike a healthy balance.** Encourage self-reliance and independence in your college-aged children. However, also remind your child that you are there if needed. Allow your college student to set and pursue goals and handle some important decisions on their own, such as choosing a major and social activities.
- **Stay in touch.** Check in via phone or email, and send cards and care packages to let your child know that you are thinking of him/her. Ask your child to help you set up a regular time to talk on the phone or to chat online.
- **Keep your child in the loop.** Even though your child may be living elsewhere, he/she needs to feel connected with his/her family. Keep your college-aged child informed and included in important family decisions, and share, through email, events and activities at home.
- **Promote positive relationships.** Encourage your child to develop friendships and build a support system outside the family by getting involved in school activities and campus life. Close social relationships and supports are very important during the potentially stressful college years.
- **Encourage your children to give back.** Children can feel a sense of empowerment, control, and accomplishment by participating actively in their community. Encourage your child to volunteer and help others.
- **Help is available.** Remind your college student regularly that help is available if he/she is feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious. Point out that he/she can seek out support from family, friends, and professionals. Discuss mental health services that are available on campus with your college student.

- **Look for warning signs.** Speak to your child if you see any significant changes in his or her mood, behaviors, or social activities. If you notice a number of risk indicators such as social withdrawal, depression or irritability, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, falling behind in schoolwork, and/or statements of loneliness in your college student, you and your child are encouraged to seek professional help.

How to Help College Students Manage Money

- **Teach responsibility.** Encourage your child to take responsibility for his/her every day finances, including paying bills and maintaining a budget. If you plan to assist your child with living expenses, work out a monthly amount that is feasible and provide it to your child on a monthly basis. Allow your child to allocate the appropriate amounts for paying bills, food expenses, and social/pleasure activities. Give your child guidance on setting up bank accounts, balancing checkbooks, and planning ahead for expenses.
- **Encourage independence.** If your child needs additional money, encourage him/ her to look into part-time jobs, and/or work-study or other positions within the university. Your child may also be able to find a paid internship that will provide experience along with help in choosing a career path.
- **Teach caution.** College students are often faced with temptation to sign up for credit cards, enter into contracts with gyms, banks, and cell phone companies. Make your child aware of the responsibility and financial commitment that comes along with these contracts, as well as possible hidden charges. Your college student may also seek out student loans for financial support during college. Talk to your child about these decisions and the potential impact of excessive debt on later credit.

Taking Care of Yourself

During the important transition to college, parents may have difficulty separating from their children. Changes within the family structure may also be prominent, including increased responsibilities for siblings and changes in routines. It is important to spend your time productively and take care of yourself when your child goes off to college. Some tips include:

- **Enjoy yourself.** Explore or rediscover your own interests and new activities. By focusing on pleasurable activities and exploring your own interests, you are likely to experience an improved mood and sense of confidence and accomplishment.
- **Stay healthy.** Engage in healthy behavior such as eating nutritious meals, exercising, and getting enough rest.
- **Plan ahead.** Make arrangements in advance to see your child for holidays and homecoming. Check with your child first to make sure the plans work with his/her schedule.
- **Seek support.** Spend time with friends and family and talk with other adults who understand what you are going through. If you are feeling overwhelmed, distressed, or upset and it is interfering with your daily functioning, consult with your physician or mental health professional.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.


Giving Children Back Their Childhood