

# Preparing your teen for the first year of college

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## Opinion

Few experiences in life compare to traversing the emotional chasm of leaving home to attend college. Many unexpected challenges await incoming freshman, testing confidence and character. Without the psychological readiness to manage these tests, the academic preparation that opened the doors to college won't keep them open. Difficulties with college roommates and hall-mates, troubles adjusting to a new environment, and poor self-discipline are among the life tests that can make it or break it for the new college student.

Parents can also be caught off guard by the student's response to independent living. But careful observation, sensitive dialogue, and preparatory steps can help parents contribute to their senior's readiness. Here's how to help your high school senior get ready for college.

Be watchful for signs of social discomfort or immaturity. Finding happiness in college is multi-faceted, but one critical element is social success. Flexibility, personableness, conversational ability, and courtesy are just a few of the social skills that are critical for adjustment to dormitory life. If your soon-to-be college student has trouble relating to a diverse peer group, as evidenced by aloofness, withdrawal, arrogance, provocation, or other unsociable tendencies, carefully address these issues with them. Suggest that their "people skills" could use a little upgrading if they want to give themselves the best chance for college happiness. Allow for independent steps that promote self-reliance, self-restraint, and level-headedness. Inexperience places college freshman at a distinct disadvantage when it concerns the variety of opportunities that await them. With this in mind, students need to take preparatory steps while still in high school.

Parents are wise to gradually extend permission-giving in order for them to build the "decision-making compass" so important to having fun in college without paying too high a price. Sleepovers that seem unnecessary to parents, concerts that require distant drives and decisions that puzzle parents, may be part of the trial and error learning so important to building that compass.

Recognize when discussion of events is not optional, but critical to success in college. It's not uncommon for seniors to pull the "I don't want to talk about it - I'm going to college" card when parents want to discuss a "compass failure." Gently persist but resist the impulse to threaten to take the car away or some other "indispensable" privilege. Express the hope that you can have a helpful dialogue that leads to

learning on both ends, not just a one-way lecture. Give them the chance to tell their side without interruptions and then ask for the same. Try to find common ground where they walk away feeling understood and better prepared for the next "compass challenge."

Build upon the trusting relationship you have established, or do some relationship renovation now. As pressures build in college, and students begin to sink or swim, their willingness to open up to parents to ask for helpful advice can mean all the difference. If students hold an expectation that their parents will boil with anger or stand in critical judgment of their failings, parents will not be approached for help. Now's the time to curtail yelling, scolding, judging, embarrassing and all the other reactions that are "trust destroyers." Replace them with a lot of listening and respecting their need to make their own decisions sometimes, stumble a little, and learn how to get back on their feet.

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