

Launching your College Student by Gwynne Kohl, PhD

You survived what you thought was the worst part—you sat with your junior picking out colleges, you visited schools, you monitored the application process senior year, you paid the fees, you waited anxiously for acceptances, you handled disappointments and helped problem-solve where to go and how to pay for it. And now there is only one more month your precious teen will be at home before launching to this new phase of life. You are filled with a mix of emotions—you are excited, sad, apprehensive and sometimes so irritated with their demanding, self-involved behavior that you wish they were already gone.

The launch to college is the biggest change many 18 year olds have ever experienced. Both parents and teens may grieve the end of childhood and have big fears about this big change. Whether teens are talking about it incessantly or seemingly ignoring it completely, it is on their minds. Some teens (and parents) cope by unconsciously “spoiling the nest”, sabotaging solid relationships to make leaving easier. They may be breaking household rules, testing limits, being more disrespectful than ever before. The good news is that your current interactions do not necessarily predict the quality of your relationship with your teen once he or she settles into college. So, hang in there, try not to take their behavior too personally right now and keep your eye on the goal at hand: helping your teen prepare for this launch.

As you are muddling through this period, here are a few things to think about for both summer and fall. First of all, if you don't already have a copy of *The Launching Years* by Laura Kastner, it's not too late. Get it immediately! Much of the information in this article was gleaned from her book and my clinical supervision with her over a decade ago.

- Make sure you have a clear financial plan for more than tuition, room and board. Negotiate who is responsible for books, basics and fun. Will they have a monthly allowance or just ask for money as needed? An allowance helps them learn to budget, a much-needed skill in teens these days. Will they be expected to have a campus job? Will they have a credit card, checking account, or campus debit card?
- Make sure you have a clear medical plan. Where do they go if they get sick? If they have regular prescriptions where do they get them filled? If they need to see a counselor regularly or for some transient adjustment issues, how does that work? Most colleges have counseling centers, but they offer limited sessions before transferring students to other local resources. Now that your teen is 18 years old you will have no access to their medical information without their consent—do keep this in mind!

- Laundry, laundry, laundry—make sure your child knows where and how to do it! This seems to be more troublesome for boys. A general level of dirt and disorganization is to be expected, but having basic self-care skills is as important as going to class. There is no time like the present to practice.
- Academics: Discussing your academic expectations for the first semester is essential. Based on your teen’s high school performance, what seems like a reasonable minimum GPA and course load? What are the consequences if they do not meet these expectations? Do you expect them to be involved in other activities (sports, work, etc) or is that contingent on their grades?

With college comes significantly more freedom in creating and managing their schedules, but some teens continue to struggle with this process. Just because they got into college does not mean they can handle the freedom. Keep in mind that the frontal lobe of their brains—the part that is responsible for organization, problem-solving and delaying gratification—is not fully formed yet! Considering additional supports and structure may be helpful for some teens, especially if their grades start to drop. Discuss this with them beforehand so they realize that they have an opportunity to succeed independently, but if they can’t, some changes will need to be made to ensure their success. Make sure you know the campus resources, such as writing center, tutors, and supplemental instruction before you need them.

- Communication: How often do you expect to hear from them? Many teens text their parents multiple times a day as they are walking to class, but some can go for a week or so with no contact. There is no right plan. Try to follow your teen’s lead, but it is okay to request a quick check-in every few days and a weekly longer phone or skype call.

Expect “dump phone calls”. Teens feel most comfortable unloading and showing vulnerability to their parents, so they will call you when they are stressed, overwhelmed, or wanting to transfer schools! Know that 9 out of 10 times your teen feels better when they hang up the phone, and you feel worse. The same strategies that worked so well at home, will continue to be useful: Be quick to listen and slow to give advice; empathize and ask questions. Begin to adjust to your loss of control. Encourage your teen to make their own decisions and tolerate their confusion and mistakes. It’s okay if they don’t always make the right choice as long as they learn from it. If these phone calls escalate in frequency and intensity and your teen is not going to class, you may need to seek more support from school personnel.

- Roommates: Most college freshmen have never shared a bedroom and now they have roommates and suitemates. Make sure your teen is considering dorm options that best suit them. Most likely this decision was made months ago and your teen is coordinating what to bring with their new roommate. If

your teen is distressed about their roommate, remind them that it is actually best not to expect him/her to be their best friend. If they end up having the nightmare roommate, changes can be made. Be ready to help your teen advocate for themselves.

- **Friends:** If your teen is worried about making new friends, remind them that this takes time. Best friends happen more because of mutual academic and extracurricular interests, but often freshman initially make friends with others people in their dorm. After the excitement of orientation there can be a social vacuum. This is normal and your teen needs time to create friends like he or she had in high school. Be cautious about new friendships that become intense very quickly. This is a common response to feeling alone and scared, but relationships that form very quickly are less stable. If possible, suggest to your teen that they consider delaying joining a fraternity or sorority until spring semester so they have a chance to make a more informed decision. First semester is a great time to check out different clubs, intramural sports and other campus activities.

College is also a great time for your teen to reinvent him or herself if their high school social scene was dissatisfying. Nobody knows or cares about their high school reputations. This is an opportunity to start fresh—new style, new interests, improved social skills? Just about anything is possible.

- Making a plan to see your freshman soon can be reassuring for both you and them. Is it parents' weekend, Thanksgiving, a quick weekend home? Make sure you are on the same page and solidify the plans. For particularly nervous teens, you can offer an optional extra weekend just a few weeks into school. Hopefully they won't want to come home that soon, but it might be reassuring to know it is possible.
- As your teen leaves home, you need to rethink your parenting style. You are still their parent, but if you try to maintain the same authoritative approach that worked in high school, your teen will likely balk after having so much independence. Try a more "relational" approach in which you speak frankly about your feelings, concerns, and thoughts about a given situation but you turn over the decision-making to your teen. They have the "license to choose." For example, instead of a curfew, ask for quiet when they come home late. Also consider increased responsibility at home in terms of waking themselves up, doing laundry, cooking meals, and managing finances. Remind them that with increased privilege and freedom comes increased responsibility.
- For parents whose primary job was parenting their teen (versus working outside the home), this can be a challenging time in terms of redefining your identity. You will continue to be very important to your child, but

rechanneling some of that daily parenting energy into new pursuits will help you adjust to your evolving relationship with your teen as well as maintain your own well-being. Take some time to think about new (or old) activities, passions or interests that you didn't have time to invest in until now. Also allow yourself to grieve the loss of your teen at home.

- Many parents find it helpful to stay connected with other parents of college students. Other parents (that you trust and respect) can be a good sounding board for any concerns that arise as well as commiserating about missing your kids. Parents who have children that are 3 to 5 years older than yours can be especially helpful in reassuring you and passing on valuable lessons learned.

This is a challenging time, but also a wonderful time. As Dr. Kastner writes, "Launching a child from home is as big as birth. If you do it well, with an ingenious mix of staying connected and letting go, it can inspire you."