

Getting Your Teen Ready for College

Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

Today Contributor

Ever wonder why it's almost impossible to rent a truck in August or early September? Probably not, but just in case you are *now* contemplating the question—it's because all of the parents of college freshman have signed up for them. Yep, they've been planning ahead for the *big move* and have the corner on the rent-a-truck market, at least for the next few months. I've sent two kids off to college, rented the trucks and helped to move them, so I feel that I have (as a mom and a psychologist) some first-hand experience with this endeavor. I offer the following advice, tips, and shoulder to cry upon.

Packing Up

Assuming you've all survived the summer in one piece the going off to college routine really has several distinct parts to it. First comes the difficult distinction between “what I want to take with me” vs. “what I have room for and what the college will allow in a dorm”. Usually the two are very different things. Kids want to take a lot—their computer, stereo/CD system, all of their clothes, music, pictures, yearbooks and the list goes on. Trust me; there is not enough room for all of that! Dormitories are usually tiny, cramped spaces and the kid generally has to share it with at least one other person. So forget the knickknacks and stick to the basics. Every college or university offers a list of necessary items to bring—just check their web site or call the Housing or Admissions offices for further information. You can always send items at a later date if it is really necessary. And, keep in mind that stuff gets stolen at school. I don't care if it is an Ivy League school or a tiny institution hidden in the Ozarks—if the item isn't tied down or locked up consider it at risk. Laptop computers should have the capability to be locked to the desk (yes, there is a locking device available just for that purpose) and credit cards, cash, digital cameras as well as other valuables should be kept in a *locked* file cabinet in the student's room. And, it should be *kept* locked, as well as the door to the room.

Physically Okay?

If your teen is like most others, the last place they want to visit is the infirmary. So, please be sure that their medications (for allergies, asthma, and birth control if that is an issue) are up-to-date and packed. It's a good idea to have your teen get a physical with his or her pediatrician or physician, just to make sure that everything is working well and that there are no physical limitations that have to be addressed. Make sure that all vaccinations are updated—Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccines should have been given at one and five years of age for entrance into all public schools. Make sure that your child has had the Hepatitis B vaccine, as well as Menactra—a newer vaccine for Meningitis that is specific to the strain that appears to haunt the halls of college

dormitories. In fact, many parents are having their younger children who attend camps at colleges during the summer get the Menactra shot before leaving. Also, please ask your teen's physician to speak a bit about exercise, nutrition and the dreaded "Freshman 15"—the 5 to 15 pound weight gain that many kids experience during the first year or so of college. Review healthy food choices and where the child can exercise cheaply (or for free!), safely and conveniently.

Emotionally Okay?

You know your son or daughter better than anyone, and if you sense more than a bit of anxiety about the move be sure to address that. Many kids have fears about not being able to fit in, making friends, leaving old buddies or loves, and how they'll fare without Mom or Dad to talk to on a daily basis. Some teens, of course, are raring to go and won't give it a second thought, but many, many fresh high school graduates are fearful of the unknown. Some may even be depressed about leaving home or their old friends. Consider engaging in counseling if you and your child can't figure out the feelings and resolve them—a good counselor can let you know what will help your teen to feel more comfortable with the move (coming home on weekends, or not seeing you too often; getting a nudge to join a service or social fraternity or becoming involved in their religious organization). Thinking and talking about fears and concerns *ahead* of time will make the transition much more successful and pleasant.

Life Skills and Life Lines

Okay, so you have the list of what will be brought to school and what stays home. Next, it's time to make sure that your teenager has been taught some basic life skills. This doesn't necessarily mean that he will use these skills, but at least you've explained the procedure and will feel a tad less guilt should he falls on his face!

Before the big day, be sure that your child has done at least a load or two of laundry, including the moving the wet stuff to the dryer part of the process. Consider a discussion of darks vs. lights, and mention the concept of bleach for the white socks and underclothes, but don't expect too much interest. Hey, it's his stuff and if he wants to wear pink T-shirts that's his problem! Most dorms have irons and ironing boards available in the office, so you may want to show the kid how to get out the wrinkles, but he probably won't be paying close attention. Consider purchasing a spray bottle of wrinkle releaser instead. For the really lazy and smelly kids, there's a product available designed to cover up odors (on couches, carpets, etc.) but college kids will spray it on their clothes rather than hit the dorm Laundromat. The Laundromat is also a prime place to get stuff stolen, and many kids are not willing to sit through a complete wash and dry cycle to make sure that their clothing is not taken. Most just bring the laundry home on visits anyway, hoping that Mom or Dad will do it.

Will your teen be driving to school and keeping a car on campus? Be sure to run through the *basics* of car maintenance (and be brief—the eye-rolling begins after the first few sentences). Show how to check the air pressure in the tires (especially if the vehicle is an

SUV), the oil level, and the radiator/coolant fluid level. Point out the dial on the dash board, usually next to the fuel indicator, that shows whether the car is about to overheat and discuss what the child should do if that indicator moves toward the red zone. Review how to deal with a flat tire (Change it? Use a fix-a-flat product? Call AAA?)

Okay, next you need to discuss perhaps the hottest topic of all in terms of college prep: the budget. Rule #1—THE KID IS NOT ALLOWED TO SIGN UP FOR A CREDIT CARD. The charge account vultures will be lurking near favorite feeding holes on campus during the first few weeks, preying on unsuspecting freshman and offering free T-shirts, CDs and other “gifts” *just* to sign up for an account. Explain to your child that she doesn’t need to begin to establish her credit history at this time, contrary to what the vultures will proclaim. There will be plenty of time later in life to do that. Teach her to live on cash and to use her checkbook. Also, explain how to balance a checkbook and how that must be done each month in order to avoid overdrawing her account and racking up a \$35 fee per bad check. Let her know that you are not going to foot the bill for bank fees that she could have avoided.

Set a budget, which is often easier said than done. Unless you’ve had an older child recently in residence at the same college by which to gauge expenses, you’ll do a lot of guessing at first. A good place to start is to purchase the school’s meal plan—at least the kid will be eating. Nutritious food is offered (if not taken advantage of) and that part of the budget will be accounted for. Some turn up their noses at the cafeteria food--when my son took a gander at the food offered, he decided that it was *mystery meat*, and chose to go it on his own. Big mistake—three and one-half weeks later and \$500 poorer, we figured out that fast food gets very expensive. The mystery meat began to look better to the kid and we signed him up for the meal plan for the rest of that year. Also, consider payments needed for dormitory, tuition, books, fees, video nights, shooting pool at the student union and pizza at midnight. Then, depending upon your child’s responsibility level and nature decide whether she can handle being given the entire spending money for the semester at one time, or whether it should be deposited into her account on a monthly or weekly basis.

Finally, make sure that your kid has a telephone calling card to use (most dorms do not allow direct access to long distance calling) or a cell phone. If you decide that the cell phone is the best option (and it often is) be sure to check to see if it works well on the road to and from school as well as at the college—in the dorm room and on the walkways between classes. Decide whether it would be best for the cell phone’s “home area” to be based in your hometown, or whether it should be purchased at school, depending upon what would be more convenient for the student. Also discuss what you expect in terms of calls home per week, minutes to be used on a monthly basis or whether email will be the primary communication device.

Getting to Stay at College

Huh? Why would a parent want to bring up the *possibility* of the kid having to move back home, even before school has begun? Well, because it happens, and it happens too

frequently. I believe that one of the main reasons for college failure is lack of focus on the child's part. Kids need clear guidelines about what your expectations are, and without these being spelled out, disasters can occur. Sure, many college freshman are super-organized, focused and raring to hit the books. But just as many are immature, disorganized and ready to party. *Now*, not after a disastrous month or two, is the time to discuss your expectations with your child. I suggest that the following issues be covered:

- What grade point average needs to be *maintained* before Mom or Dad yank the kid home and he matures at the community college for two years until he's ready to venture out again? Keep in mind that community colleges can offer excellent educations, are usually less expensive, and you can offer more guidance and supervision if your child is just not ready to "do it on their own."
- What are your expectations about going to class and not lazing around the dorm room, sleeping in and hoping to catch the information from the roommate's notes or via video classes?
- How about drinking or even drug usage? Underage drinking is an all-too-common and socially acceptable college practice, but underage drinking is illegal, stupid, and can quickly get out of hand. Most of my clients who fall into this pattern begin to skip classes, get behind in their studies and withdraw from courses.
- How many credits must the student *complete* in the semester? Lots of kids register for twelve or fifteen hours but drop to six or nine by the end of the semester. The expectation of the minimum number of credits completed per semester is an issue that should be addressed and agreed upon by both the parents and the child *before* the semester begins so that there are no ambiguities. Statistically, more kids take four and one-half to five years to complete college now than the traditional four-year program—partly due to legitimate changes in their major area of study, but also due to too many wasted semesters when only six or nine hours of course work were actually completed.
- What should the child do if he or she finds that they are in over their head—either academically (grade or credit problems), socially (too many friends or parties), or emotionally (homesick, not enough friends, lonely)? The college counseling center is usually an excellent resource if the college student doesn't feel comfortable talking to Mom or Dad about these issues.

Tips for College Success

A few years ago *Newsweek* offered the following information about successful students. Share these with your student—it may be an eye-opener for both of you!

- Students who engage in extracurricular activities are the happiest students as well as the most successful in the classroom. They seem to find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives.
- The most successful kids found "mentor professors" to work with during their tenure at school—this activity led to letters for job recommendations or future references, which become exceedingly important later in life.

- 70 to 75% of the students in the study felt that they needed more guidance on courses to take, extracurricular activities, and advice from administrators than they were receiving. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the oil!
- Time management is key. Kids are generally horrible at it, and the study showed that who studying in a long uninterrupted block of time was much more effective than studying in short bursts.

Home for Visits!

Okay, so the kid packs up and moves to college, generally sticks to the budget, eats at least a few meals a day, and is making the grades. So far, so good. The next hurdle concerns the inevitable evolution of the parent-child relationship now that the child has “grown up”. Well, grown up in his mind, but perhaps not in yours. Remember, Junior will have been coming and going as he pleases by the time of his first visit home, and may balk at some of the old rules, curfews or restrictions. He thinks of himself as an adult, deserving of adult privileges, and hopefully he is. In a nutshell, he probably expects to come and go as he pleases at home just as he did at the dorm. Problem is that he’s had two to three months of “adult-like freedom” and eighteen-plus years of being your kid. The two often clash.

Some suggestions:

- *Be realistic about curfews.* To be fair, and to keep your sanity, you’re probably going to have to compromise. As long as he’s not breaking the law and is acting responsibly (not being in a car with someone who is drinking alcohol or using drugs, or noisily waking up the neighborhood at 2:00 AM when he does come home) you may want to consider letting him call the shots on curfew. See if it works, and if it’s within the realm of reasonable, go for it. If he’s disrupting the household or getting into trouble of course you’ll need to change the rules and lay down some stricter guidelines.
- *Be realistic about time spent with the family.* Face it; he’s not coming home *just* to see you. Trust me, I know. Former high school buddies are important to keep in touch with, and if they’re home he’ll want to be hanging around with them as well as visiting with the family. Suggest a compromise—how about dinners with the family and one evening on the weekend spent together, and the rest of the time is his to spend with friends or just to lay around in a bedroom larger than a cracker box.
- *Mind your manners.* Although you may want to personally escort your child back to the dorm, or run up the street waving goodbye as he drives off to return to school, try to keep it together. If not for you, then for him. The kid doesn’t need to feel guilty about leaving home—he needs to focus upon his classes and the future that lies ahead.

By following these guidelines, you and your teenager will be better prepared for a pleasant and successful college experience. This should be one of the most exciting,

demanding, and stimulating times of his or her life. By avoiding problems such as poor grades, financial disasters, or emotional meltdowns the child will have a much greater chance of success in this new life chapter.