

Spreading Their Wings: How to Help Young People Succeed in College

It's that time of year and that time of life.

You pack your car or van full of clothes, electronic devices, a lamp or two, sheets, blankets, and a pillow, some basic food supplies, and all the rest of the paraphernalia necessary for your 18-year-old to survive a first semester of college.

On the drive to the campus, you may, like Polonius in *Hamlet*, give advice to your child, instructions such as study hard, avoid the party-and-drinking crowd, choose good friends, get enough sleep, and, in the words of Polonius, "to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

On the way home, you may shed some tears over your fledgling flown from the nest, remember admonitions you forgot to deliver, and weep again when you go into the living room and see that pair of battered sneakers by the back door or that soccer trophy in the cabinet by the television set.

Sending your son or daughter off to college can be tough on the emotions. For many of these young people, going to college can be tough as well. It constitutes a giant step toward adulthood. This may be the first time they are free of direct parental supervision, and circumstances will force them to make choices, good and bad.

Some students handle their new life responsibly. They attend classes, join in extracurricular activities, get their work done, and find some fun along the way. Others cut classes, stay up until dawn, sleep past noon, and fail at their work, apparently oblivious to the fact that college is not a summer

camp and they are paying big bucks while partying away their opportunities.

Even as your child makes mistakes, avoid the temptation to be a helicopter parent. College should be a time of growth for students, an arena in which to test themselves against the world. When you constantly run interference for them, you stunt that growth.

However, there are some suggestions parents may pass on to their students to help them find the right path.

1. Advise that students [approach college](#) like a 40-hour workweek. Students taking 15 hours a week of classes should be studying another 25 to 30 outside of class, sometimes more. Many of today's students study only 10 to 15 hours per week. Encourage your young person to keep tabs on the clock, even if it means recording the hours in a notebook.

2. Encourage students to seek academic help when they struggle with a subject, meaning they have put in the hours and still can't grasp the material. When one of my sons was in college, he took most of his compositions to the writing center for editing. Other students complained that the editor, another student, was too harsh and so visited her infrequently, whereas Jake wanted her stiff criticism. You can also urge your struggling student to see professors during office hours for more help.

3. Encourage students to take a variety of courses. They may be entering one of the STEM fields, but learning to write well will help them succeed in that field after graduation. If they are majoring in the humanities or want to take liberal arts courses, encourage them to find professors who know their stuff, share their expertise with students, and don't spend class time carping about politics.

4. Tell your sons or daughters to make friends with the campus library. Some dormitories provide study rooms, but usually

studying in a dorm means noise, distractions, and interruptions. Some students don't think of going to the library until they're already failing a course.

5. Warn your yearling college student about electronic distractions. The guy who's always texting buddies back home, messing around on YouTube, or watching Netflix is wasting precious time. Let them know it's okay to have some fun, but they must put in the hours first.

6. Encourage extracurricular activities. Most schools offer an array of clubs, intramural sports, volunteer organizations, and various societies. Maybe your young person will discover a talent for debate or a desire to sing in the chorale. These activities are a great way to meet people and to discover what might become a lifelong avocation.

7. Explain to students that college is a gift, the last time your daughter or son can devote the bulk of each day to reading and learning. Never again will they have this much time for books, attending lectures, or hammering out issues.

8. Make sure your children know you support them. Send them emails with online articles relevant to their studies or with upbeat advice. Put a letter or a package in the mail to them from time to time. Listen to their complaints, but instead of offering instant advice – a fault of mine – ask questions.

Remember, encouragement, but not interference. Making mistakes and accepting responsibility for those mistakes is a part of growing up. The more they mature in college, the better our young people will be prepared to face the challenges of the adult world.

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