



Transition to College and University: Tips for Parents

David A. Wolfe, Ph.D.
RBC Chair in Children's Mental Health
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

As our children leave home for college, university or other pursuits we, as parents, face our own dilemma: what role do I play? How involved (or uninvolved) should I be? We read a lot of stories about drinking, assaults, and property damage on campuses – how do we keep our children safe?

Transition to college or university is probably the most difficult shift for many young adults (the first being transition to high school!). As before, your role of parent remains important, but with some critical differences.

Before we examine your role, let's take a brief look at the influences, choices and pressures many young people face as they leave home and learn to adapt to new responsibilities. Understanding the context of their situation is a major first step in providing the most helpful guidance:

As soon as they arrive on campus students need to make new friends and social connections, and learn to make decisions not only about their studies, but about their social life. According to research, the top stressors faced by young adults during this transition are changes in their sleeping and eating habits, coping with more responsibilities and workload, and managing the stress of less money and more pressure to take part in social activities.

These changes often bring out new or unfamiliar emotions that he or she needs to recognize and perhaps discuss. Some of these emotions are quite normal, such as anxiety, worry, sadness, confusion, whereas others may be more extreme and disruptive (such as feelings of inadequacy, disorientation, depression, or hostility). No matter how severe, research shows that students who are confused by their emotional reactions to entering college or university and who seem unable to express how they are feeling find the transition more difficult.

Think of the following tips as ways to find your balance point along this continuum of parenting in late adolescence: At one end are parents who could be described as *over-involved*: they may be too indulgent, intrusive, or even smothering. At the other end are those who seem *under-involved*: these parents may be too disinterested or unconnected to what young adults face, and come across as too rigid, uncompromising, or out of touch.

The mid-point is the place you want to be: You're interested in your child's new life, informed and available when needed, respectful of privacy, and able to express your expectations in a supportive (non-demanding) fashion.

Ten tips for parents

1. **Be a parent (not a friend).** While growing up they learned to depend on you for mature advice and guidance. Continue this role, and step back a bit from needing to know everything in their life.
2. **Don't intrude.** Let them make new friends, while knowing you're still a major part of their life. Try to resist the temptation of contacting them too often, through emails, text messages, Facebook, phone calls and so forth. Let them take the lead here (so long as it feels right to you).
3. **Don't pressure.** As parents, we're sometimes too eager to see our kids find their niche, settle their plans, and reach their goals. This can come across to them as pressure or demands. But this takes time, and it's their time and their life (if it's your money, see Tip #9!).
4. **Encourage new ideas.** College and university is a time to explore new options and be exposed to new possibilities. Young adults like to know that their parents trust their decisions and have their best interests in mind, so encourage them to explore new courses and interests, even if it could mean a change in focus or delay in completing their degree. In the long run this is time well spent, for they will have chosen a career that is best for them.
5. **Be supportive.** To deal with the stressors noted above, it is important for students to feel supported in their transition to college or university, but still in charge. Students who learn to manage the tension and worry associated with academic and social changes end up more successful and well-adjusted. As before, your role involves listening and guiding, not directing, cajoling, or pressuring. If they (or you) need help with this, see Tip #10 below.
6. **Encourage friendships and connection.** If your child seem lonely or disconnected he or she is also more likely to be experiencing the other problems mentioned above. In contrast, students who are successful in developing meaningful relationships with peers have fewer emotional and physical symptoms of stress, and reap more benefits from their new experiences. With this in mind, your role may be to encourage them to try new interests, develop new friendships, and go new places – even if they're a bit uncomfortable. Activity and availability are the antidotes to loneliness and isolation. Encouraging connection is especially important if your child lives at home.
7. **Be a touchstone of maturity and good advice.** In an effort to make friends and fit in (or to cope with stress and anxiety), some students choose to engage in excessive drinking, drug use, promiscuous sexual activity, and other health-compromising activities. To some, their new surroundings offer little resistance to over-indulgence and irresponsibility, which is every parent's biggest concern. Rather than telling your child what he or she can or cannot do (or bribing them not to do it!), let them know what you expect of them, how proud you are of their efforts, and how available you are if they need advice. They are adults now, so feel free to remind them on occasion what consequences they might face for irresponsible or illegal activity (these may include legal, financial, academic, social, and similar consequences).

8. **Avoid “helicopter parenting.”** Some say today’s parents are more hovering and protective than previous generations, which can make the process of transition difficult for some who are used to daily contact with parents. While it is important that you provide ongoing support and remain involved and interested in your child’s life, you must be willing to back-off and let the student grow.
9. **Assist with time and money management.** Many students are ill-prepared at managing their time or their finances, which contributes to their stress. As well, many students today have credit cards and amass sizable debt, yet they may not have a good understanding of how to manage debt (and may expect you to take over!). Resist the temptation to reduce stress by giving money – remind them of their choices, help them plan a budget, even monitor their accounts if need be (with their permission), to help them avoid the common trap of over-spending and under-planning their time and money.
10. **Recommend academic and student counseling resources.** Most campuses today offer a wide variety of student assistance, but parents and students may not know how to ask for the help they need. Academic and mental health counselors are the most familiar with the problems faced among this age group, and have the best resources available to assist. If your child seems to be struggling with any of the issues raised herein, the first line of defense may be to have him or her speak to a counselor. An academic counselor is available within their department or faculty, whose job it is to help students find the right courses, learn better study habits, and take advantage of campus opportunities. Student counseling services are available to assist with all other aspects of health and well-being, including therapies to improve coping skills, strengthen relationships and connection, and many similar functions.

In case you're worried about what's going to become of the younger generation, it's going to grow up and start worrying about the younger generation.

- Roger Allen

Suggested resources for parents:

- a. A “calendar of student concerns” is available at: www.residentassistant.com/reslifepro/listofstudentconcernsbymonth.html. For those who want a detailed reminder of what it’s like to be a first-year student at most colleges and universities (the good, bad, and the ugly), this is the place to visit.
- b. Landow, M. V. (2006). *Stress and mental health of college students*. New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. This book offers a compendium of research and advice concerning the needs of college students and a review of prevention and treatment approaches for this age group.

© David A. Wolfe, Ph.D., RBC Chair in Children’s Mental Health, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health