

Top Ten Parenting Tips to Promote College Readiness

“Don’t prepare the path for the child, prepare the child for the path.”

~ Author Unknown

Or, as we say at LifeSmart, “Give them wings, not strings.”

Preparing our children for a successful launch into adulthood is one of our greatest parenting responsibilities. And a huge milestone! Unfortunately, many college students are struggling at this pivotal time of life. Our nation’s college *completion* rankings are plummeting, and we are witnessing a surge in mental health issues on campus.

Parents, we need to take the lead in turning this around. So, for the next two weeks, we’ll be sharing our best tips to help set your teens up for a successful college experience.

1. ***Stop the helicoptering!*** Many collegian issues stem from parents’ efforts to *manage* their children’s happiness and success. A student’s inability to make decisions, cope with stress and adversity, and understand the world doesn’t revolve around them are predictable outcomes of helicoptering. When we step in to prevent failure, do their homework and applications, defend misbehavior in front of authorities, text them incessantly, and hover and control their lives and decisions, they *will* struggle on their own.

As authors of *Parenting for the Launch*, we encourage parents to adopt an empowering approach that increasingly treats their teens as future adults. That means training them with strong internal guiding principles and giving them freedom, responsibility, and accountability to apply them. Yes, it may result in some *short-term pain* (e.g., a tough life lesson, failure/disappointment, unhappiness, anger), but it’s for the sake of *long-term gain* (e.g., resilience, grit, problem solving, coping, independence).

2. ***Foster healthy coping habits.*** Everyone has their stressors, but, during adolescence, they’re often exacerbated. By nurturing self awareness in our children, they’ll be able to: 1) identify the *signs* of their anxiety (irritability, restlessness, sleeplessness), 2) isolate the *source* (tight deadlines, relationship strains, exams), and 3) *release* their stress in a healthy manner. Together, these can help teens and young adults prevent and/or cope with the pressures of the day.
Which stress relievers work best? It depends. For some, it’s an intensive cardio workout or blasting music. For others, it’s a bath, a good book, a walk

along the beach, or prayer/meditation. Respect whatever works best for them, *so long as it's healthy*.

3. ***Build positive social adaptability.*** When it comes to social life, the transitions into and out of college are arguably the most demanding. Our support system of family and friends may seem light years away. In *What I Wish I Knew at 18*, we devote considerable space to social adaptation. We encourage students to explore affinity groups of others who share common interests and values. To make a list of BFF qualities and quietly evaluate new acquaintances accordingly. To stay patient and selective, knowing it's all about *quality and positivity*. Parents, you can instill these valuable habits while they're under your roof by helping them find opportunities to meet new people in new social settings.
4. ***Cultivate strong time management and planning disciplines.*** With demanding courses, endless activities, newfound freedom, and higher stakes, many students struggle with disorganization, distractions, and last minute cramming—all anxiety boosters. During the high school years, parents need to stress that time is a precious asset to be used wisely. Encourage them to use planners, block their time, build in margin, and create daily to do lists organized by importance and urgency. This is particularly important for the procrastinator, who won't find it as easy in college. Remember, fun is fine, but the work comes first!
5. ***Apply empowering, but realistic, academic expectations.*** It's wise to expect some grade deflation in college as compared to high school. The transition is significant, the competition is greater, and students suffer tremendously when parents expect perfection. Today's students (both high school and college) often face intense and unrealistic pressure from parents to achieve the highest GPAs. Granted, we *should* expect our students to do their best, but that doesn't automatically translate to a 4.0. Oh, and one more thing: encourage your collegian to take a slightly lesser academic load in his/her first semester. It'll make for a smoother transition.
6. ***Respect their need for balance and margin.*** In an effort to build a foolproof resume for their college applications, many students overcommit and are completely stressed out. Most of this is originating from performance-driven parents who mean well, but who are undervaluing their children's need for balance, margin, downtime, and sleep. Not surprisingly, rebellion and/or high anxiety are common in college as a result of this pressure.

This is a reminder to parents to help teens maintain a healthy work/life balance. Be realistic about the time requirements of their activities and avoid overscheduling. Also, encourage them to be highly selective in committing to college activities, especially in the first year when there are so many exciting opportunities. Variety is great, but balance is key.

7. **Develop career savvy.** Many high schoolers are needlessly anxious because of pressure to know exactly which career to pursue. However, the reality is they're still discovering themselves! Also, they've yet to take advanced courses in their major, and many haven't even spoken with actual practitioners to gauge whether a certain career path is a good fit.

You can play a constructive role with your high schoolers by building *career awareness*. This means: 1) having them complete career assessments (e.g., www.careerbridge.wa.gov and www.careercruising.com), 2) introducing them to people with interesting careers, and 3) training them on the *process* of selecting a career. Also, be sure to develop their marketing skills for interviewing, resume/cover letter writing, and networking. Offer real world career insights, including the qualities that employers value most (e.g., integrity, high standards, dependability, relational skills, positivity, work ethic, and resilience). [What I Wish I Knew at 18](#) has several excellent success pointers to build your teen's career savvy.

8. **Instill healthy living habits.** The Freshman 15 (pounds, that is). The party scene. All nighters. Yes, they're real. And, too much of a good thing is spoiling many college careers. With newfound freedom and a world of choices—some healthy, some not, and some even illegal—many students are underachieving, anxious, in poor health, and eventually, dropping out. Freedom can be a two-edged sword.

It's beyond the scope of this blog to do delve deeply into healthy living habits, but these are a must to nurture *before the fact*: 1) nutritious and balanced eating (a huge challenge when they enter Carb Heaven!), 2) physical activity and exercise (working out at the gym/joining intramural teams), 3) adequate sleep, and 4) positive stress relievers.

9. **Build their financial literacy.** Far too many college careers are abbreviated for financial reasons. Whether it's due to lack of affordability, poor spending habits, or credit card debt, student financial stress is impacting performance and college completion. Of all the topics where parents mistakenly assume their children are trained in school, this is number one. For too many schools, personal finance is *not* a requirement or even offered. Parents should assume the leadership role here.

Some financial musts for your future collegian: 1) understanding needs versus wants, 2) knowing how to develop and *adhere to* a budget and spending plan, 3) understanding the basics of credit and debit cards (latter preferred for collegians), and 4) choosing a major that will yield a positive

return on college investment.

10. *Impose guidelines for technology/social media use.* While technology serves many useful purposes, the side effects rarely receive the airtime they deserve. Issues with shorter attention spans, addiction to devices, distraction, lack of motivation, irritability, communication deterioration, wasted time, constant stimulation, and, yes, destructive content, are interfering with student health and success.

To counteract these influences, institute and enforce healthy boundaries in your household (e.g., time limits) when it comes to technology and social media use. You may lose some “popularity points” with your children, but the stakes are simply too high for a *laissez faire* approach.

We hope these tips are helpful to you, and we encourage you to share them with others in your sphere. Let’s set all of our future collegians up for success!