

Tips for Successfully Launching Your Kids into College

give space...

don't be clingy...

let them fail...

clearly communicate expectations...

be both firm and loving...

don't let them come home every weekend...

let your students handle their own problems and don't call the school on your student's behalf...

teach them financial responsibility...

don't let them use credit cards...

send care packages...

let them wrestle with, process, and own their own faith...

the first holiday they come home—Thanksgiving—is a big deal...

oh, and by the way, be prepared to give lots of space and grace that Thanksgiving weekend...

But as you read the below tips that I hope will be helpful in preparing you for the journey, keep two things in mind:

First, in reality, there are going to be some things that you have not prepared your incoming college freshman for. Don't let your anxiety over what you didn't talk to them about paralyze you for future conversations.

Second, you need to approach your kid's transition into college as an opportunity for ongoing conversations that take place not only in college but throughout life. This is not a one-time talk and then you're done. It's never too late to create and take advantage of opportunities to talk with your kids as they too try to navigate this transition in their life.

Keeping these two things in my mind, there are at least three key areas that are important for parents to think through:

Key Area #1: Explore and Clarify Boundaries A boundary simply lets someone know where they begin and end in relationship to another person. As your kid ventures off to college for the first time, one of the key questions that they will be continually asking themselves is "*What can I and can't I do?*" They are out of the home seeking independence, yet more than likely they are very much dependent upon you for a variety of things (like emotional and financial support). The college transition provides a good opportunity for parents to let their kids explore a variety of boundaries such as curfew, major/minor options, vocational choices, peer group, and traveling. Below are a few tips for navigating boundaries:

- **Tip:** When you drop your kid off at college, don't stick around. Leave them so that they can begin the process of making connections with those students around them. In fact, some colleges now have "parent bouncers" to force parents away from freshman orientation so that kids can be by themselves.
- **Tip:** An observation that has been made in some college circles is that both parents and college kids should monitor the frequency of visits home or to the college campus to visit one another. The question being raised is if a student is continually going home visiting parents/friends, or a parent is continually visiting the campus, can it inhibit a student from properly putting down roots and establishing healthy connections that will help them feel at home in college?
- **Tip:** Clarify expectations about rules (i.e. curfew, chores) when your child is home for the weekend or holiday. I recommend that parents have a conversation and mutually establish these expectations with their college kid prior to the first visit home.
- **Tip:** By all means communicate with your kids via the phone, text messaging, and *Facebook*. But don't let that communication become something that either of you become dependent upon. College is a great place for your kid to begin the process of establishing healthy relationships with peers who can become a new support network.
- **Key Area #2: Finances, Budgets and Credit Cards** I was 18 years old when I first came across an American Express representative sitting at an information booth in our campus commons area. I walked away with my first credit card that day, and began racking up the debt that would take me a long, long time to pay back. Even if you have been teaching your kid all along about being financially responsible, college life can often be very different as new temptations to spend money become more readily available.
- **Tip:** Discuss and set clear expectations with your kid about what you (the parent) and they (the student) are responsible for paying. Who is paying rent? Gas? Car insurance? Food? Entertainment? Clothes? Trips?
- **Tip:** Have very frank and open discussions with your kids about the use of credit cards. 4 Do you want them to have a credit card? What about just using a debit card? Many students begin the process of piling up credit card debt in college that takes years to repay. Help them make wise choices early.
- **Tip:** Be realistic as a family about what can be afforded in terms of college. Sometimes going to the "best" school that costs \$60,000 a year may not be the best option. Explore other ideas like junior college, tech schools, or working during college to prevent incurring unmanageable amounts of student loan debt.
- **Tip:** Help your student develop and implement a healthy working budget that will keep them financially accountable during college.

- **Key Area #3: Let Them Fail...and Succeed** At some point (multiple points actually) during your kid's college career they are going to make mistakes and fail. It will be these mistakes and failures that will provide rich opportunities for them to learn from and hopefully grow in the process. It is hard to watch your kid fail, but resist the urge to swoop in and rescue them in the process.
- **Tip:** By all means, *do not intervene* on their behalf at school by calling a faculty member or school administrator about their grades or the trouble they may have gotten into. And do not intervene in their social relationships, such as trying to problem-solve an argument between your son or daughter and their friends.
- **Tip:** A bad grade or a failed class is not the end of the world. Let it be an opportunity for them to suffer the consequences and take responsibility for it. Then talk together about what they may have learned for next time from the failure.
- **Tip:** Remember that this is *their life*, not yours. Therefore, give them the freedom to explore various academic and career options, even if that journey includes stumbling along the way.
- College is a four-year (or maybe five- or six-year) journey that is going to be filled with plenty of ups and downs. So it's important that you remember that this is a process by which everyone (parents and kids) are being challenged, making mistakes, succeeding, celebrating...and hopefully all growing and being transformed in the process.

Action Points

- Sit down with your college kid before he or she leaves for school and begin a conversation about evolving expectations especially in that first year. For example, parents and kids can establish the amount of times they may connect on the phone or online during the week with one another. Or you might talk about the first visit home for a student, or the first visit to the campus for the parents. What kinds of expectations are there for that initial visit? Academic expectations?
- Offer your attendance and assistance to your kids during that initial parent weekend or move-in. But let the kid determine how much or how little they want you to be involved, if at all, on those days.
- Find some symbol or ritual to help you and your kids mark this transition into college. For example, you could plan a family trip, write an encouraging letter/story to your kids talking about this transition, or could help celebrate the transition with a nice dinner or a large family barbecue. Be creative! One parent created a blanket made out of all the t-shirts from all the schools, teams, camps etc...
- Share this article with an adult friend who has already sent kids away to college, and ask them to meet with you over lunch to talk about what they learned along the way that might be helpful to you as you face this transition. Then ask them to pray for you through the coming months.