

When Responsibilities Outweigh Readiness: Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood

A chat with Ruth Hughes, PhD



“FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS I HAVE BEEN HEARING FROM our CHADD members about the challenges of this demanding age,” says Ruth Hughes, PhD. “I hope to share some of the accumulated wisdom about raising both young adults and teens.”

Hughes is currently serving as CHADD’s interim CEO after serving as both Deputy CEO and Chief Program Officer. She is a clinical psychologist by training and has an adult son with ADHD who is thriving. Hughes was for seventeen years the CEO of the International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services (now USpra), an association representing providers of rehabilitation programs for adults and children with serious mental illnesses. She has also been the CEO of a state association for rehabilitation and a large psychiatric rehabilitation program affiliated with Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Hughes now leads our staff and volunteers in the execution of CHADD’s mission: helping to improve the lives of all who are affected by ADHD. She’s particularly drawn to addressing the needs of youth as they transition to adulthood. “We could continue this conversation for a very long time,” she says. “Remember CHADD is here to help.”

Our son is trying to prepare to go back to college after failing his first year miserably. Is there a college just for students with ADHD?

A number of colleges specialize in helping students with ADHD and learning disabilities. If you are a CHADD member, look in your back issues of *Attention* magazine and you will see several of their ads. You can also do a Google search for “ADHD and college” and a number of schools will come up. Also, many community colleges are very good at helping students with ADHD. Whatever college you are considering, be sure to visit and talk with staff in the disability support or student support office. And be sure your son goes to college with a 504 plan. Colleges will give accommodations to students with disabilities.

The title of this chat describes my twenty-year-old son exactly. He graduated high school a year and a half ago. He went away to college, but had to withdraw after the first year because he missed too many classes. Now he goes to the

community college, but managed to flunk a one-credit health and fitness course. He is very bright, but just doesn’t “get” college. What are his options?

Well, first let me share with you that my son Chris, who is now twenty-three years old, has been in and out of community college for the last three years. One of the wisest statements I have ever heard about ADHD is that we must remember that our young people are maturing about thirty percent slower than their peers. So if your son is now in his early twenties, remember that his maturity level is more like sixteen or seventeen.

College is very tough if you are very impulsive and you have little motivation to do well. It is a perfectly fine option to take a year off and work full-time. Then your son is learning about how the world operates for adults and what kinds of jobs are available without that college degree.

Once he has an idea of what he wants to do in the world, he will be a more motivated and responsible student. After my son Chris worked in retail at the mall, he was ready to go back to college.

How do we as parents foster independence in our child and go from “rescue mode” to “support mode”?

I have found this to be my biggest parenting challenge, but incredibly important. First I have to change my mindset. When Chris was little, I found it worked to ask myself if I was teaching him the skills he would need when he was twenty-five. Today I’ve moved that to thirty. By taking the long view you are more likely to let some real world consequences happen.

Once I am thinking long-term, I try to be sure my young man knows what needs to get done, and the real-world consequences of not completing the tasks. I also want him to know what supports or help are available. And then I back off and bite my tongue. It is better for our teens to trip and fall when you are around, rather than to have it happen when they have left home.

When a problem occurs, first let your son or daughter vent. Once the emotional upheaval is past, then help him or her to problem-solve. You can ask questions like, *What happened? What options are open to you now? What would you like to do next?* But be sure to keep this a collaborative process and not dictates from mom or dad.

I have found that a certain amount of real-world consequences can be an incredibly effective teacher. I thought my son would never learn to stop overdrawing his bank account with the ATM card. But once I stopped rescuing him, he slowly got it. He had many interactions with the local bank officers and they were far more effective teachers than I could be. Depending on the situation, sometimes the best thing we can do for young adults is to get out of the way.

Do you offer consequences when a teenager or young adult has the “I don’t care” attitude?

Take a step back and see if you can sort out what the “I don’t care” is all about. Often it’s a

The important thing is that your son knows you are there for him when he needs you, and he *will* need you. When he comes with a problem, try not to be judgmental, but be there to support and help him to address the problems directly.



FOR MORE INFO

- › Contact CHADD's National Resource Center at help4adhd.org or by phone (800-233-4050) between 9AM to 5PM EST and a health information specialist will respond.
- › Find the NRC's *What We Know* information sheets on ADHD and Teens, including WWK #20A and #20B, in the "About ADHD" section of the NRC website.
- › CHADD members can access a wealth of information in the "Teens and Young Adults" section of the CHADD website.
- › For tips on driving safety for teens and young adults with ADHD, visit the NRC website help4adhd.org/en/living/parenting/driving and the CHADD website chadd.org/content/chadd/efparents/teens/driving/default.htm.

cal problems? What are your teens' strengths? Then work to link the current tasks to those interests and strengths.

Part of the challenge of growing up is to find a niche in the world where you can contribute and have satisfying work. For our kids, school may be anything but that. But if we support them in the things they enjoy and are good at, you begin to build both self-esteem and a willingness to work at some of the things they are not so good at. So think strengths rather than weaknesses and screw-ups.

There are consequences in the world when you don't do the things expected of you. As a parent, you have to decide what consequences you need to allow to happen, and when you need to intervene. The bottom line is I intervene if there is any threat to my teen's safety or to anyone else's.

Remember that an important part of being a teen is having attitudes and opinions that are in direct opposition to your parents. That is part of moving towards independence, even if it's a rather unpleasant part.

My son is very impulsive with money (which he doesn't have at the moment). How can we help him to realize how his dangerous spending without thought of the consequences is going to ruin him? He has overdrawn his accounts over and over again.

Boy, do I relate to this question. I was certain my son would be in bankruptcy as an adult. And it's also a good example of so many of the adult management skills our teens need to learn. First think baby steps. You give your teen an allowance that is meant to cover certain items—dates, school lunches, snacks. When the money is gone it is gone, and you never, never, never, never bail your teen out by forwarding money before the next allowance time.

As your teen gets a bit older and is beginning to understand how to manage allowance, you might get a prepaid credit card (prepaid is the key) that is to cover school clothes and some other big-ticket items. If the money is all spent on pizza, then your son or daughter is not wearing new school clothes. The key here is for you as a parent to be absolutely consistent. If you rescue your teen, then you have taught your teen that the money will be there no matter what.

The next step for us was when Chris got a job and his own checking account. Those ATM cards are absolutely deadly. Thank goodness recent legislation has made it much more difficult to overdraw your account and generate huge bank fees. But if this happens, then you can support your young adult in working this out with the bank or alternately learning how to get by with no money. I am serious that the bank officers were much more effective at teaching my son to handle his account than I could ever be. The bottom line is, don't rescue, but do support and problem-solve.

How do you balance distraction and the need for a young man to have a driver's license?

I am so glad that you asked a question about driving. This is a safety issue. Teens with ADHD are four times more likely to get tickets than teens without ADHD, four times more likely to be in an accident and seven times more likely to have a second accident. So I urge parents to go slowly. And this is the place where parents do need to intervene. The real world consequences here can be way too dangerous for us to stand back.

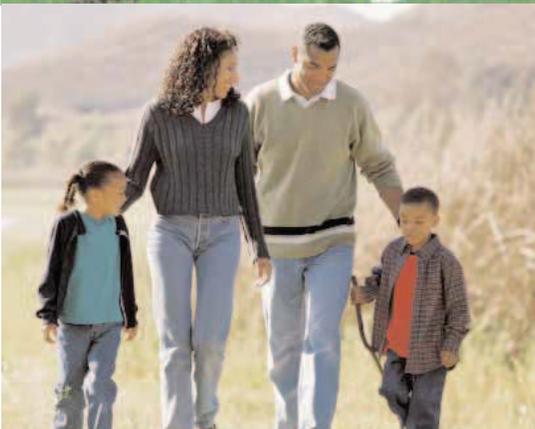
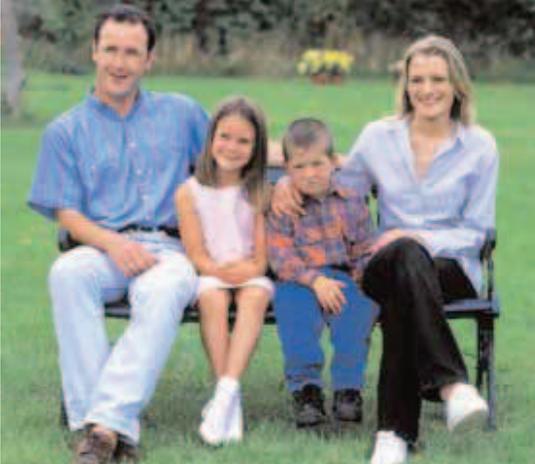
If your teen is at the age where he or she wants to get a learner's permit, then I encourage you to develop an agreement with him or her with a very clear understanding that this is a privilege that must be earned.

way to get parents off their back. Sometimes a young adult really doesn't care about the matter at hand. And sometimes there is a lot going on. Remember also that our young adults with ADHD are often very in the now and not considering long-term consequences.

So what is a parent to do? First try and identify together what your teen does care about. Is it friends? Music? Computer games? Does he or she like working with kids, solving techni-

AD/HD

What Role Do Genes Play?



- Doctors at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland are conducting a large, national research study to find specific genes that contribute to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).
- If you have two or more children, one of whom has AD/HD, please consider participating in this study.
- The AD/HD-affected child must be 7 to 17 years of age, and the other children must be at least 7 years of age.
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For more information, call:

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Here are the things to think about:

- First your teen must pass the learner's exam and know what the traffic laws are.
- Most states then require a certain number of hours behind the wheel—I would triple that at a minimum. Our teens take longer to learn how to drive safely.
- Consider having your teen take lessons at a driving school in the beginning. It will save many initial meltdowns between parent and teen. There is just too much baggage between you.
- Have clear rules about driving behavior—absolutely no cell phone, no texting, no friends in the car, no eating in the car, and so forth. And you need to model these same rules as the driving adult.
- Have rules about medication as well. Teens who are taking their medication are better drivers than those who are not. You want to be certain that the medication is effective during all driving times.
- Be sure you include a plan for covering the cost of gas, insurance, and the car. Make your teen responsible for whatever they can reasonably pay.
- Talk about the consequences of speeding and tickets from the get-go; if you get a speeding ticket you lose the car for one month, and you must pay the ticket yourself. If you get a second ticket you lose the car for two months, and so forth.

Because of our driving contract, my son did not get his license until he was eighteen. That extra time helped him to become a better driver, and he really learned to drive. He spent about five hundred hours behind the wheel with me or another responsible adult. Cell phones, food and friends were not allowed in the car at all. And if there was a dispute between us, I unscrewed the license plate off the car or I took the keys.

As you can see, I think this is very different from letting the real-world consequences help teach our children. Death and disability are not good teachers. This is an area that we need to be very, very proactive and to set the rules clearly. Be proactive.

What about computer games? They are my son's downfall. When he was a teenager, I would limit his use of video and computer games. As a twenty-year-old, it seems like he should be learning how to manage his time, but he doesn't.

How much should I intervene?

Let me turn the question around. What is he not getting done because he's playing computer games all the time? If he is not getting to work on time, not getting to class, or not ever seeing friends, those things do need to

be addressed. Some of our young adults get so into computer games that they are not able to manage their lives. I would start the conversation on the life management issues, not the computer games.

For a small number of our kids, playing

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computer games can be addictive. If you think it is this serious and your teen or young adult has no control, then seek professional help. If it is not this serious, but troublesome, then talk about the life management stuff that is not getting done and put a mutually developed plan in place.

One of those parental mantras that is helpful for lots of situations with our teens is “Work before play.” Once the work is done you can plan all you want.

Some young adults who use marijuana in college claim they are medicating themselves for ADHD. What is the adult response, since they don't want to be medicated?

Substance abuse in all its forms is a real risk for our young adults with ADHD. Because impulse control is a symptom of the disorder, our teens are two to three times more likely to get involved with illegal substances.

Many, many people who take illegal sub-

Don't send your young person out in the world with the expectation that everything will be wonderful. If you acknowledge that everyone encounters problems, he or she will be more likely to come to you and less worried about letting you down.

stances are self-medicating. Your college student may well be more relaxed and think he is more focused when smoking marijuana. But there are too many downsides and many other options for more effective treat-

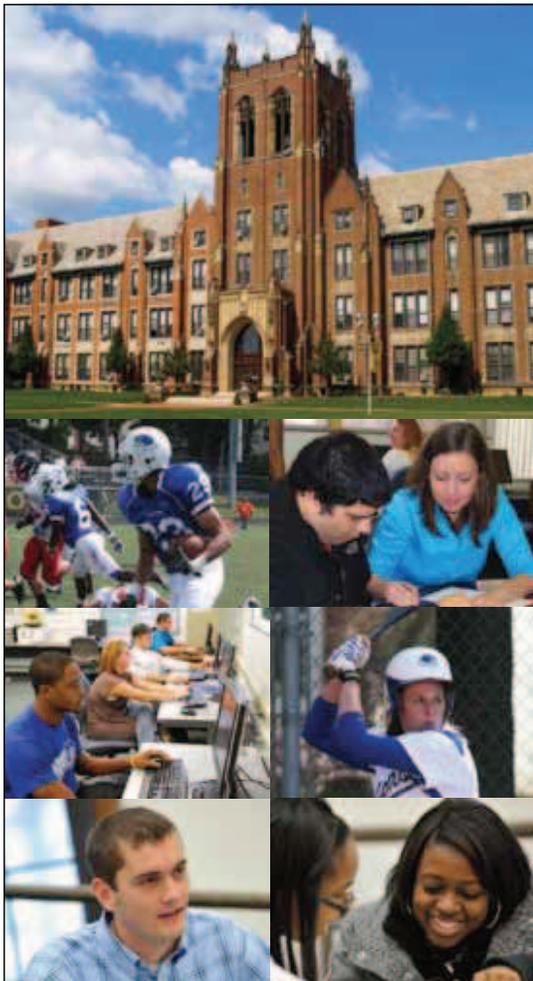
ment. If your college student feels the need to be treated, then he or she needs to go to the doctor and get treatment designed for ADHD and/or whatever other disorder(s) he or she is struggling with.

Otherwise, I would suggest you cut through the explanation and stick with the important points. It's illegal. You may not do this in my house. And I am very, very concerned about the negative effects of smoking marijuana.

While marijuana can certainly help you feel more relaxed, I highly doubt that it helps teens focus more effectively or to think better. They may feel that way in the moment, but I suspect that is highly inaccurate feeling.

And if any substance abuse—alcohol or drugs—is a problem for your teen or young adult, get professional help early in the process before it turns into an addiction.

Our twenty-year-old son will soon be ready to live on his own, with a roommate.



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How much monitoring and checking in on him will we need to do?

That depends on your son and how ready he is to be on his own. I suggest you develop an understanding before he moves out that has you checking in on a regular basis, and more often in the beginning. What I say to my Chris is that I need to do this for me as much as for him. That by touching base it helps me to not worry. That takes away some of the “you don’t trust me” feeling.

Find a compromise. You may want to check in daily, he may be glad to check in once a month, so maybe once or twice a week. Come to an agreement about monitoring the important areas—money, school, work. And you need to decide what are the areas that you need to look the other way on. I think one of the major reasons that we send our young adults off into the world is so we don’t know all the scary details as they begin to experiment with adult decisions. So do some serious thinking about those things it is time to let go of—things like sexual relationships or cleanliness.

The important thing is that your son knows you are there for him when he needs you, and he *will* need you. When he comes with a problem, try not to be judgmental, but be there to support and help him to address the problems directly.

Are there any rules of thumb about the readiness of the person with ADHD to take on more responsibility, and any about how much responsibility to add at once?

Always think baby steps. All big responsibilities can be broken down into smaller chunks. So go slowly and go for success. Don’t give your teens more responsibility than they think and you think they can handle. If you disagree about the amount of responsibility and you definitely will, then compromise and ask your teen to demonstrate their ability before giving more.

The other thing I would suggest is you always plan to start at home first. The worst time to take big leaps in responsibility is right after leaving home. But that is exactly what we usually do. If your teen or young adult will soon be leaving home, be sure to start the independent responsibility for the most troublesome area before they are gone. For instance, making money last for a month, before he or she is away at college.

Also be sure your son or daughter knows that there are people who can help, including folks who are not their parents. And be sure to acknowledge together that there will be problems and you both commit to working on them when they come up.

Don’t send your young person out in the world with the expectation that everything will be wonderful. If you acknowledge that everyone encounters problems, he or she will be more likely to come to you and less worried about letting you down. **A**

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