



Supporting Your Teen through the First Semester of College

A PARENT'S GUIDE

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THE OFFICIAL ACCEPTANCE LETTER arrived. Now, the bags are packed and the minivan is stuffed full with school supplies, duffels, dorm essentials, and the mini-fridge. Late August and early September mark the time when teens are headed to college. But as exciting as the first several weeks of college can be, this is also a period of challenging adjustments. Recognizing the signs that your new college student is homesick, anxious, or frightened allows you to employ some simple conversation starters in a way that supports him or her in this new adventure.

THE FIRST FIVE WEEKS

Within the first five weeks of the college transition, students can experience the following challenges:

- They are adjusting to new responsibilities, new relationships, and new freedoms. This may be a challenging and emotional time for new students who are trying to make adjustments all at once.
- They may be insecure about fitting in, being as smart as everyone else, and/or navigating unfamiliar surroundings.
- They may be unsure of what to expect academically as they start classes with professors.
- They may be working to establish a new schedule and managing their time.

Caught up in the transition, students may not be likely to be as open about the stress, confusion, excitement, fear, or anxiety they are experiencing. As a parent to a new college student, you can have a significant impact on your child's success or behavior by asking four easy questions to help evaluate the transition during the first five weeks.

1. How have you been involved on campus?

If your teen is not involved, brainstorm possibilities with him. He might choose to join a campus club, participate in wellness or outdoor opportunities, enroll in sports, or find a campus job.

2. How are you keeping track of assignments and managing your time?

If your teen struggles with these executive function challenges, ask her, "Would you be willing to get some help

with this?" Discuss the use of on-campus academic support services such as working with a disability support professional or a tutor. Have her explore campus skills workshops. Hiring a professional ADHD coach can provide more individualized and consistent support.

3. How is your sleep/nutrition?

Explore the possibility of sticking to a schedule, creating a bedtime routine, keeping healthy snacks around, making meals convenient, and negotiating sleep and nutrition patterns with roommates.

4. What upcoming events are you excited to attend?

If nothing comes up, encourage your teen to research possibilities through the campus calendar. After he has a chance to review the calendar, ask him: "What activities seem interesting?"

Try not to overreact if the first telephone calls or conversations are frantic. Listen carefully and try to determine how best to address your student's needs. Whether you brainstorm ways to get involved on campus or discuss the use of academic coaches and tutors, let your child know that her feelings are normal as she moves into a new environment. Help your teen solve problems at her own pace.

Brainstorm options together, break large problems down into manageable issues, and refer your teen to campus support systems for more assistance. Most importantly, empower him to take control of the challenges. Remember that he has skills and strategies that he can carry over from high school. In addition, new college students can develop new strategies through accessing on- and off-campus resources.

THE SECOND FIVE WEEKS

During the second five weeks of the transition to college, your teen should feel more acclimated to the campus environment. New students are likely navigating the essentials like classes and the dining hall; however, they may still be struggling with defining who they are outside of classes and fitting into the larger social setting.

During the second five weeks of the college transition, students may experience the following challenges:

- They may begin to question their identity, push boundaries, and experiment with new things, possibly including alcohol and drugs.

- They may begin to experience diversity as they encounter people different from themselves.
- They may have trouble managing time as coursework, extracurricular activities, jobs, and social commitments increase.
- They may begin to understand that what worked in high school academics will not necessarily work for college.

While your son or daughter may be establishing a routine, it is important to discuss how he or she is managing other life functions, such as social life, sleep, work, and

even mid-term exams. Here are four easy questions to help evaluate your child's transition during the second five weeks of college:

1. How do you like your classes and professors? Have you visited faculty during office hours?

Continue to ask about your teen's favorite classes during the semester. Be interested in her courses, build excitement around their studies. If she has a class that she is struggling in, ask her, "What support do you need to make it through the class?"

2. How are you preparing for midterm exams?

Your teen may not realize the amount of time it takes to prepare for a college-level exam. You may want to follow up with a question like, "What will it take for you to feel confident going into these exams?"

3. How have you been finding the balance between academics, social life, sleep, work, and campus involvement?

Managing all of life components on his own for the first

time can be challenging for your teen! You may need to explore with your child: "What do you need to do in order to take care of yourself?"

4. How do you feel about your class schedule for next semester? Have you met with your advisor?

Ask your teen to think about the following question: "What do you like and what do you not like about your current schedule?" Engage her in a conversation around what she would change about the future semester if she could. Providing an opportunity to process what an ideal schedule looks like can help her develop talking points for when she meets with her academic advisor to schedule future classes.

Express interest in your student's academic pursuits and encourage him to engage with college personnel regularly. Suggest exploration of academic resources if he is struggling. Learn how your student spends his free time to determine if he is managing time well and connecting with others.

THE LAST FIVE WEEKS

With the last five weeks of the semester, it is important for parents to recognize some warning signs that are associated with the end-of-semester projects, papers, and exams. During the last five week of the college transition, your teen may experience the following challenges:

- Term papers and projects are due; students may feel overwhelmed and stressed.
- Students may resort to unhealthy patterns to handle stress. Little sleep and poor nutrition and exercise may lead to illness.

Recognizing this time as a high-stress period, these open-ended questions allow you to gauge how a student is handling the wrap-up to the semester and what supports he may need moving forward:

1. How are you preparing for your final exams? How can you stay motivated?

For our teens with ADHD, studying in increments or providing themselves with rewards can help them stay motivated. In addition, having a study buddy can increase accountability.

2. I/we realize this can be a very stressful time. How are you planning to relieve stress?

Make sure your teen is building in self-time. This self-time can be a good opportunity to take a break from

intensive studying. It can be helpful to remind your teen that the upcoming December break will be a great opportunity to relax and rejuvenate.

3. How were you able to achieve your academic goals for this semester? What would you like to do differently next semester?

Asking your child "What worked for you this semester and what didn't?" allows for her to process how she may make minor alterations to improve her success.

Parents can utilize various strategies to guide students through this stressful time period. Encourage healthy behaviors during final exams, such as exercise, sleep, healthy foods, and/or journaling. Remind your son or daughter to connect with tutors, academic coaches, advisors, counselors, and professors. Your student may be reluctant to share semester grades, so bring up the subject if he or she does not. Discuss academic successes and recognize them. Lastly, it is never too early to discuss and process any disappointments from the current semester in order to set strategies for a more successful second semester. 🗣️

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