



# NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## **College – A Time of Transition for Adolescents and Parents**

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Do you remember your child's first day of school? Did you help them choose their clothes and pack their backpack? Walk them to the school or classroom door? Talk about it at home so they would know what to expect and be able to let go of your hand and walk into that classroom on their own?

Leaving for college is a whole new experience. Our adolescent children are going to be starting out for the first day of college on their own. Parents can help them prepare for this by being both emotionally supportive and practically helpful. But "leaving the nest," "empty nest" - so many clichés make our college bound children sound like baby birds, ready to fly, navigate, and sustain themselves. And are we, the parents, also to be some cliché, whether fussing over them or pushing them out of the nest, perhaps too soon? You have provided the nurturance making it possible for your child to take this giant step toward independence. These next few months are more emotionally complex than the surface transition might suggest. We encourage our children to stretch their wings and fly out into the wider world, yet we still want to nurture and protect them. Our feelings may range from happiness that they are accomplished and ready for college to sadness at the impending loss of their daily presence in our lives.

This is an important time in the emotional life of each parent-child relationship. As adults we can strive to be self-aware and understanding of our child's needs and our own feelings. Our kids may not discuss it, but each is also acutely aware of the big changes soon to come. For those planning to live at college, they are literally leaving home. Some are ready to be more independent and will separate easily, but many may feel lost and homesick at first. For those who will be commuting to college it will still be a new experience demanding more independence, more choices, and many changes in academic demands, classroom routines, and social relationships.

For the high school senior, there is excitement, even exhilaration in their special status. But no change comes without some loss. Each child is surely feeling the impending loss of familiar surroundings and their high school -whether much loved or not. The one with many friends will worry about missing them; the one who has been lonely is concerned about whether college will be a better place. Confident seniors will become freshman trying to learn their way around the campus and the social scene.

Even the best students wonder if they will be successful. Those with learning issues are concerned about getting the help they need. Emotionally troubled kids wonder if they will be okay, let alone happy. Gender identity issues may surface at this time, or become of concern due to dormitory living arrangements. Our kids may act like everything's "cool." But, below the surface, there is turmoil and angst. Parents can be helpful if they step back enough to be realistic about what their particular child might need. Colleges usually have resources for students with learning and emotional issues, but these can be difficult for the new students to access while they are moving in, meeting roommates, and buying books. Parents can anticipate these needs and help students plan in advance, so that they have appointments already set up if they will need special academic help or counseling.

The end of senior year is filled with parties, class trips, and Prom. There is often pressure to be celebrating and little outward acceptance of anxiety, doubt, worry or sadness at the changes to come. Parents, we need to listen to the music as well as to the words. During this transition, it is important to listen even more closely when few or no words are spoken. There is no simple “how to” guide. It is too subtle and individual a process for that. Thinking about your own child - this particular child - is very helpful in offering the support needed.

It helps to be interested and available as a listener. As a psychologist and as a parent of children who have made this transition, I was often thanked for the times I said the least. If you are not sure what to say, it is okay to listen and be your child’s sounding board. Supportive comments like “there’s so much going on in your life” or “it sounds like you are thinking about this a lot” may allow your teen to express feelings and share ideas. Jumping in with advice and your own experiences is usually less effective.

Parents have feelings too. Pride and happiness are easy to share, while many parents hide their worries and feelings of impending loss. I remember thinking about rearranging the placemats at the dinner table rather than have an empty mat at one seat. Symbolic, but a clear indication that I was trying to figure out how to handle that suddenly empty chair at dinner. It is easier to be a good listener when you are in touch with your own feelings.

Parents feel anxious and uncertain too. Talk to your friends and parents of other seniors. Read some of the many books on this topic. I recommend reading several books to consider different perspectives and many ideas. Accept that this is a time of change, challenge and growth for parent and child. Even if older siblings have paved the way, each passage is unique.

Allow kids to express their feelings without being critical. Follow your teen’s lead. Be available to talk when your adolescent opens the door. It is crucial to allow feelings to be expressed without being critical. Stifle the urge to give unsolicited advice and opinions. This is a good time for adolescents to practice working things out on their own in the safety of a familiar environment. If they ask for advice, ask questions rather than lecture. Questions that help them to explore an issue may enable them to resolve it on their own. The process is as valuable as the solution, since they are developing confidence and greater skill at navigating on their own.

In today’s college application process, acceptance is less predictable than in the past. Empty reassurances are not helpful. Tell your teens you recognize their strengths, talents, hard work and uniqueness. Coping with acceptances, deferred status and rejections can be opportunities to build resilience. Self-esteem is especially vulnerable during this tumultuous time. Not being admitted to a particular college, may be more about the needs of the school than about whether your child would have thrived there. Hearing from you that they can be happy and successful at many schools and that their own abilities and efforts will matter more in the long run is an important message to send.

When a child goes to college, parent’s relationships with each other are affected, too. This passage can be a stressful time for a couple whose teen is maturing and getting ready to transition to college. It is not unusual for couples to approach the process differently. We each have different “hot buttons.” Agreement on all aspects is rare. It is important to respect each partner’s emotional and problem solving style. Different personalities, experiences, personal and cultural backgrounds always affect how a parent interacts with their child and their partner. It is only natural that these differences may be heightened during a time of family transition and stress

Take some time to be a couple too. It can be reassuring to parents to have fun together and see that a dinner away from the whole family is fine. It also lets your almost adult child see that the two of you will be ok when they leave. Listen thoughtfully to each other. Remember that parents are also in a state of transition during this process.

Find ways to use each partner’s strengths to successfully support your young adult’s experience. The one who is most comfortable listening can be the calm emotional sounding board. The more action-oriented parent can help the student with the practical tasks of responding to college deadlines, comparing

financial aid packages, managing waiting list issues, rooming arrangements, meal plans and many other details that will require attention. Single parents often have a particularly hard time with the college separation process. All the work of completing college applications is burdensome enough. But singlehandedly managing the emotional roller coaster of choosing among the schools that granted acceptances, handling rejection, high school graduation and ultimately leaving for college is formidable. Sometimes the parent child relationship is closer when the parent is single. The experience of loss may be more keenly felt when there is no partner with whom to share it. It can help to reach out to friends and other single parents who have weathered this storm successfully.

Your feelings will be different with each child's passage. The experience of the first child leaving can feel quite different than if it is your youngest one, and different still when it is an only child. Recognize that your own experiences in college and leaving home will be different from those of your child. Times have changed and the process is very different now.

If you feel overwhelmed by your own emotions, or upset and confused by the many changes, consider seeking professional advice. When you recognize your own feelings and take care of your emotional needs, you are better able to separate these from your child's experience and better support your child's transition.

Once the decisions are made and the plans are in motion, parents still need to listen thoughtfully, to provide reassurance and offer practical help. Adolescents should be encouraged to do as much as they can for themselves with the knowledge that they can seek help when as needed. Much has been written about helicopter parents who hover over their child's every move. Technology has made it easier to be in constant contact. It is important to give adolescents room to grow, gain confidence and test their wings. Often the best answer to a question may be the reflective answer "what do you think?" Attentive listening as your adolescent thinks out loud, sorts out thoughts and feelings, and figures out what to do provides a supportive problem solving environment. Home becomes a safe place to talk about a stressful transition.

The development of an independent sense of self starts in infancy and continues through adulthood. There are parenting issues with each stage, and parents need to learn and adapt as each child grows toward adulthood and independence. It is an ongoing process but there are unmistakable milestones along the way. A child leaving for college is one of the major milestones about which all can be proud. It is an accomplishment for the child and the parents.

Soon your young adult will leave the proverbial nest. If home has been warm and nurturing, the departing student will stay connected by affection and love while making a life in the semiautonomous world of college. By providing a nurturing environment you make it possible for your high school senior to take this giant step toward independence. Each young adult navigating the transition to college will encounter different challenges as they grow through this new developmental stage toward adulthood. The sensitivity and support parents provide in these next few months can make home a place they will want to visit as they grow towards autonomy in this important life transition.

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