

## Taking Flight: The Transition to College

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“Leaving the nest,” “empty nest”—so many clichés make our college bound children sound like baby birds, ready to fly, navigate and sustain themselves. The transition from high school to college is emotionally complex for our teens and for us, too. As we encourage our children to stretch their wings and fly out into the wider world we still want to nurture and protect them. Our feelings may range from happiness for their accomplishments to sadness at the impending loss of their daily presence

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 separation from familiar surroundings. The one with many friends worries about missing them; the one who has been lonely is concerned about whether college will be a better place.

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. Our kids may act like everything’s “cool” but below the surface there is turmoil and angst.

As parents, we need to listen to the music as well as to the words, perhaps even more closely when few or no words are spoken. There is no simple “how to” guide, as the process is subtle and individual. However, here are some useful tips:

- Be an active listener.
- Accept that this is a time of change for everyone in the family.
- Follow your child’s lead.
- Recognize your own feelings.
- Work in tandem with your own, your partner’s and your child’s strengths.
- Don’t project your own fears or experiences onto your child.

Be interested and available as a listener. When 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.

**It is easier to be a good listener when you are in touch with your own feelings. Parents feel anxious and uncertain too.**

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 (*Empty Nest... Full Heart, the Journey from Home to College* by Andrea Van Steenhouse, is a favorite). Accept that this is a time of change, challenge and growth for both parent and child. Even if older siblings have paved the way, each passage is unique.

Follow your teen’s lead. Be available to talk when the child opens the door. Allow your children to express their feelings. Stifle the urge to criticize or to give unsolicited advice and opinions. Let your children use this time 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 teens 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.

Coping with acceptances, deferred status and rejections can be a tumultuous time. Your child’s self esteem is especially vulnerable. In today’s college application process, acceptance is less predictable than in the past. If your child is not admitted to a

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particular college, this may be more about the needs of the school than about whether your child would have thrived there. Kids need to hear 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 than which college they attend.

This passage can be a stressful time for a couple whose teen is maturing and getting ready to fly. It is not unusual for couples to approach the process differently. Agreement on all aspects is rare. It is important to respect each other's differing emotional and problem solving styles and it is only natural that these differences may be heightened during a time of family transition and stress. Listen thoughtfully to each other and try to establish common goals.

**Find ways to use each partner's strengths to successfully support your young adult's experience.**

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 for acceptances, managing waiting list issues, rooming arrangements, meal plans and other details. Recognize too, that your own experiences in college and leaving home will be different from those of your child. Times have changed and so has the process.

Single parents often have a particularly hard time with the college separation process. The work of completing college applications is burdensome but single-handedly managing the emotional roller coaster of choosing a college, handling rejection, graduating and leaving home is formidable. 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 parents who have weathered this storm successfully.

If you feel overwhelmed by your own emotions consider a support group or 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 support his or her transition.

Once the decisions are made and the plans are in motion, parents still need to listen thoughtfully, provide reassurance, and offer practical help. Teens should do as much as they can for themselves with the knowledge that they can seek advice as needed.

A child leaving for college is a major milestone of which all can be proud. It is an accomplishment for the child and the parents. You have made it possible for your child to take this giant step toward independence. Although your teen will soon leave the proverbial nest, if your home has been warm and nurturing, he or she will stay connected even after departure. The sensitivity and support you provide in these next few months can make your home a place to which your children will want to return, sharing new experiences as they continue their progress toward adulthood. ●

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