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How to Help a Teenager Be College-Ready

Being admitted to college doesn't mean a student is ready for it. Parents can encourage kids to step up their levels of personal responsibility while still in high school.

By Mark McConville
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As a psychologist, I receive calls each summer from anxious parents, worried that their high-school graduate won't be ready for college. In some instances, they describe the normal conflict that signals impending separation. But in some cases, they describe a child who isn't ready for the independence of college. I do an assessment and issue a recommendation — mostly green light (he's ready for college) or occasionally red light (he's not).

Either way, I'm left with a question: "Why didn't they call a year ago?" The ideal moment to think about this isn't just before college, but instead the summer before senior year or even earlier in high school — which provides ample time to address issues of college readiness. But regardless of your time frame, there are steps you can take.

Ready or Not?

Parents can't be 100 percent certain that their child is ready for university life, but 30 years as a psychologist have taught me what to look for. College-bound high-school upperclassmen are on the cusp of emerging adulthood, a transition to adult status that, according to research on emerging adults by the psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, typically takes eight to 10 years. The key indicator that an individual is ready to begin this transition is the emergence of a new level of personal responsibility.

In childhood, we associate responsibility with the dutiful fulfillment of obligations and duties: performing household chores, completing homework assignments, brushing teeth at bedtime. A responsible child is a compliant child, as it is ultimately the parent who owns the younger child's responsibilities.

In adolescence, we expect more initiative and investment regarding duties and obligations, but most parents don't abdicate oversight altogether. In other words, the parent and adolescent co-own the adolescent's responsibilities.

The most reliable signal that the transition to emerging adulthood has begun is evidence that the child has begun taking sole ownership of these responsibilities — independent of parental involvement — via personal initiative and follow-through.

This emerging ownership manifests itself in three predictable areas: medical and behavioral health, academics and administrative tasks.

Medical and Behavioral Health

Everyone has something to manage, such as a medical diagnosis (for example, diabetes or attention deficit disorder) or a behavioral challenge (such as problems related to diet, sleep or substance use). Children and adolescents manage these issues with oversight and assistance.

Transitioning to emerging adulthood requires personal ownership of these issues and learning to manage them effectively. I've worked with hundreds of students who failed in college on this account — inability to manage sleep-wake cycles, procrastination, substance abuse or unmet medical needs.

I met recently with a 17 year-old student whose parents were still setting "lights-out" curfews and providing morning wake-up services. "She can't manage her sleep needs," they lamented. "Not 'can't,'" I said; "Won't is more likely, because she really doesn't have to." A change of family policy, several mornings of parental nail-biting, and a few demerits later, their daughter was managing her sleep-wake needs just fine.

Academics

By junior year, we want to see students taking ownership of their academic careers. This shows up not necessarily in grades, but in academic initiative — schedule planning and management, and learning when and how to seek help. Specifically, we want to see college-bound students mapping the connection between their current academic performance and future life plans.

They need to know how to pay attention in class, take notes, do their homework and turn it in on time, study for tests. They should have been learning this all along, of course, but some kids manage to slip by without mastering academic routines.

If your college-bound junior or senior still requires external accountability for school work, your child may be telling you he's not ready for academic independence. Many parents focus too intently on grades themselves, rather than the process by which those grades are attained. If you still feel like the

homework police at the end of 11th grade, it's time to retire. A C-student who can manage his own academic life has a better chance of succeeding in college than an A- or B-student who depends on parental oversight.

I'm reminded of one former client whose genius-level I.Q. and intellectual acrobatics both excited and teased his high school teachers, even as he frustrated them with a lack of academic discipline. The adults in his life shepherded him through a demanding high school curriculum, ultimately landing him in a top-flight university. Obscured by the dazzle of his prodigious intellect was a crucial missing ingredient — ownership of his academics — and sadly, he failed out of college after two semesters.

This young man and I worked together in therapy for a year. At my direction, he took courses at a community college that required him to master the mechanics of breaking down a syllabus, keeping a calendar and managing follow-through. His parents cooperated by staying out of the process. The following September, he was successfully back in university — this time in command of his academic life.

Administrative Tasks

The third signal of readiness involves mundane life tasks — maintaining a calendar, meeting deadlines, filling out forms. Parents supervise these matters throughout childhood and adolescence, but college students must manage them on their own.

These minor tasks actually constitute a major developmental marker, because owning them signifies a readiness to begin feeling, thinking and behaving like an adult. Learning the nuances of administrative responsibility takes time, but is a

reassuring sign that your child is up to the task of navigating day-to-day life at college — without your oversight.

If, however, your transitioner is reluctant to assume simple (but unfamiliar) tasks, it may be worth exploring what the problem is.

Recently I met with a mother and her 12th grade son, and witnessed a loopy argument concerning his refusal to reschedule a medical appointment. After I excused the mom from my office, the young man confessed with embarrassment that he didn't want to call because he did not know what to say, and feared the office staff would yell at him. I can recall thinking the same kind of thing when I was his age. How many of us understood the nuts and bolts of how the world actually works when we were 17 or 18?

After inviting his mom to return, I asked if she would call the doctor's office on speaker phone, modeling how an appointment cancellation is done. Afterward, he commented predictably: "Oh. That's simple!"

All he needed was a script for what to say. Next time, he'll have no trouble assuming this tiny (but important) responsibility — and the broader range of administrative tasks that college life requires.

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