

What To Know When A Student Transitions From High School To College

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Senior year of high school is an exciting time in life, filled with a broad spectrum of thoughts and emotions, for students and their families. While many go through this period with relatively few difficulties, some have a tougher time.

Difficulties can stem from family and societal influences, as well as the student's own concerns and uncertainties, but conversations between the student and their family can help make this transitional period easier for all.

One issue that commonly has a negative affect on a student comes from the senior year as their last year of secondary education. Each event is the *last one*: the last sporting event, last band or choir performance, last debate, play, club meeting, or dance.

For many students, their activities give meaning to their lives and help define who they are. When much of their identity is connected to their high school friends and activities, they could be anxious about the uncertainty of their future. The last of anything can be stressful.

This often leads to an anticipatory grieving process for the students, knowing that life after high school won't be the same. The old adage that states that "the high school years are the best years of your life," adds pressure to make the most out of those years, resulting in grief and fear that these "best years" will soon be over. It can give teens the impression that life after high school will be much worse – nothing will ever be the same.

A student's family can also feel pressured; knowing that this is usually the last year the student is under their responsibility. Parenting often becomes more intense in regard to the student's behavior and school performance, as the parents' concerns become intensified due to their child's pending "emancipation." And to the opposite, adolescents sometimes place secondary importance on their own personal concerns, from a pressure to address their concerns for problems at home.

The emancipation and individuation issues high school seniors deal with also have a great affect on this time in their lives, as they are in the midst of developing their own concept of self-identity and self-responsibility, separate from their parents. Just as young children transition into kindergarten differently, high school seniors experience this period differently. While this process can be difficult for all families, some have more serious difficulties.

Some adolescents are more anxious with their emancipation and individuation period. Some adolescents go through a period of rebellion and opposition in order to develop their sense of self.

How their parents respond to this opposition can determine whether this period is a road bump in an otherwise enjoyable process, or an overriding difficulty in their family's life.

One of the biggest issues for students and their families to deal with is the decision revolving around what to do after high school.

Seniors are frequently asked throughout the year about their plans. While some students have known what they have wanted to do from early childhood, many, if not most, aren't certain. There is a great deal of societal pressure to both have an idea of what one wants to do, and to attend college after high school. This comes from the concept that one needs a college degree to obtain a well-paying job and to solidify a successful future.

However, this decision is best made with consideration of the student's individuality. If they have not enjoyed high school academics, perhaps they would enjoy the type of learning and learning environment a college offers. Or, the student might not be suited for any type of academics at this time in their life. Pushing a college experience on a student that isn't ready for college might set up even bigger problems. Many students drop out, flunk out, or have extreme difficulties adjusting to college life.

There are several options available for life after high school and parents should explore the pros and cons of each with their teen to come to a collaborative decision on the best fit for the student. Many issues can't be completely resolved, but they can be responded to in a manner that points the student in a direction that will help them mature.

By asking questions of a student who isn't certain of their plans, a parent can help them address their concerns and future plans, help parents learn more about the student, and potentially lead them to a conclusion. In addition, parents can offer observations and options, open up a dialogue to weigh pros and cons, and support the student as they weigh their different options.

For students that tend to not plan ahead, waiting, rather, for things to fall into place, a parent can share their own plans for their relationship with the student after graduation. For example, a parent can offer to let the student continue living in their home, so long as the student participates in some sort of educational or vocational training, works, and adheres to the parents' rules.

With a student who has definite plans after graduation, discussions can help students set goals for succeeding with their plans, offer a sounding board to help them with their concerns, and provide an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments.

There are a few interpersonal conversational dynamics that interfere with dialogues between parents and their children. These include:

1. When the child doesn't believe their opinions will be respected or understood.
2. When they are concerned that they aren't certain themselves and will appear foolish.
3. When the student avoids the subject matter because it makes them anxious and uncomfortable.
4. When students anticipate that they may disappoint or anger their parents with their thoughts and concerns, leading them to avoid the issues, which also upsets parents.
5. When parents' own conflicts and issues create family disharmony, making discussion another complication.
6. When parents develop hopes and dreams for their children that don't take into account who their child is. This can put the child and parent on a collision course of personalities. Or the child will acquiesce to the parents' wishes, potentially setting up future resentment from the child toward the parent and themselves.

Some parents feel strongly about what they believe is the best course for their children, and while they may be correct in many aspects, their approach may be problematic. Hopefully, parents and their children have developed a collaborative relationship, which includes appropriate roles of parent/child relationships.

So while some of the above dynamics may be present, they can be addressed in a manner that allows discussion to take place. At times, these dynamics can be too entrenched and the family could use outside intervention to support them in working through these dynamics.

Another dynamic that can significantly disrupt this transition from childhood to adulthood is if the adolescent has, or develops, a mental health concern or drug and alcohol issues. A parent can recognize these issues if the student's behavior or personality undergo significant changes. Teens dealing with a mood disorder can become more irritable and reactive than typical. They also may become more reclusive or unresponsive. An increase in breaking laws or the family's house rules may indicate

that the adolescent is dealing with a personal difficulty that may be a socially based concern or a problem with mental health or substances.

If a parent has concerns, then an evaluation with a mental health professional or chemical dependency professional would be useful to determine what the issue is, and to help address any concerns that may be present.

With any of these dynamics, parents and their adolescent children who can discuss their concerns, hopes, and aspirations will continue to develop a basis for their relationship and enhance their student's life skills. Should any concerns or difficulties arise, a part of the discussion can include seeking help to support the family reach a happy conclusion.