



COUNTDOWN TO COLLEGE

Preparing Your Teen for the Social Demands of College

What's Inside

Your teen is about to take the next big leap into a world of greater responsibility with the challenges that come from exiting high school and entering into college. In this booklet you will find suggestions for helping your kid hone important life skills and think ahead about the opportunities and risks that await them as a college student.

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Countdown to Graduation: High School Seniors

Senior year. That glorious time of wistful reverie about the of halcyon days of adolescence, gazing toward the horizon of limitless possibilities and trying to squeeze every last risk-taking experience you have every thought of before they can charge you as an adult. EVERYONE is counting down the days; teenagers, parents, teachers, school administrators, the local police. Just a little bit longer and that kid will be launched, if y'all don't kill each other first. Now that kids can no longer effectively support themselves with just a high school diploma, graduation marks the beginning of a phase psychologist Jeffrey Arnett calls Emerging Adulthood. This is a time of life marked by career training, partial independence, and lack of long term responsibilities. (It is followed, more and more frequently, by a period when adult children return home to live. A phase parents call HORIFYING!) Before you launch (or is that toss?) your kids into this next phase, there are a number of things, both practical and theoretical, your kid needs to know.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. First, don't make extra trouble for yourself. Your kid may be developing just fine. There are a few questions at the beginning each section below that will give you an idea of how your kid is doing. If they are demonstrating these skills already, be proud and leave things alone. If they haven't quite mastered them, here are some suggestions for how to help them along.

Money management. It is time for your high school senior to start managing their own money. As every parent found out during their own emerging adulthood (and in every other phase of life), money doesn't go far enough. Are they regularly asking you for extra money? Do they seem to take it for granted that you are going to cover their expenses? Do they overdraw their checking account? Does money burn a hole in their pockets? It may be time for your kid to assume a more direct role in managing their own expenses. This might include paying for gasoline, car loan notes, car insurance, Xbox live, iTunes, cell phone, etc. If you still cover these expenses, consider transferring the money for some or all of these expenses into their account and requiring them to pay the bills. For those expenses that you can't afford to have them overlook, you be the creditor. And, don't be too forgiving. They don't pay, they don't play. For example, give them a set amount for gasoline at the beginning of the week, or even more challenging, at the beginning of the month. Don't make it too generous. The idea is to require them to become aware that they will need to make some tradeoffs or to realize there are other things they need to keep up with besides the launch date of the Halo Reach or when Arctic Fire will be in town (or even getting good grades).

Communal living skills. This is where all those years of requiring them to do chores will finally pay off. Sure! Your kid is about to share a living space with people other than family. For the sake of harmony and human compassion, your kid will need to have reached the point that they don't have to be reminded to do their fair share. Mommy and daddy won't be there to remind them or enforce it. Do they pick after themselves yet? Do they take care of their chores without being nagged? Do they keep their living space relatively sanitary (if not necessarily neat)? The absence of these behaviors justifies a discussion about the need for your kid to be more considerate of others (i.e., you are not a child any more), personally accountable (i.e., people shouldn't have to remind you over and over), and personally responsible (i.e., I am not your

maid). Young adults should see chores as a part of pulling their own weight. They should automatically pick up after themselves and keep their things confined to their personal space. They should not have rotting food in their own personal living space (unless they've started an indoor compost pile, <http://www.mahalo.com/how-to-compost-indoors> in their bid to save the environment "that your generation has DESTROYED for us!"). You may even want to make them responsible for their own laundry. (Not a necessity but recommended if they seem to take it for granted.) A useful strategy is to clarify what they are responsible for and then let them know that you will be finding the most inconvenient time to have them take care of these responsibilities if they continue to make other people suffer from their inconsiderate behavior (i.e., the smell of rotting food, step over their crap on the floor, wash dishes they dirtied, wipe food bits they left on the counter, etc.). Wait until they are about to go out for the evening or find a time when they are in the middle of some enjoyable activity and have them go take care of the responsibility. If they give you grief, remind them that they had plenty of time to take care of that on their own (and then shut off their cell phone service if they keep complaining).

Setting their own agenda. Soon, your kid will have to manage their own schedule; when and whether they get up, how they are going to arrange their day, what they are going to follow through on, what they are going to neglect. It will help if they have some practice with this. Do they get up on time for school? Do they arrive for appointments in a timely fashion? Do they keep track of school assignments and exams? Have them become more responsible for setting and monitoring their own schedule. They should be getting themselves up in the morning. Have them use that damnable cell phone to alert them to appointments and other due dates. It may be useful for you to keep a shadow schedule (i.e., keeping a parallel schedule of their activities for yourself) if they haven't got the hang of it yet. If something falls through the cracks, don't just correct them. Sit down with them to review how it happened and have them identify how they are going to do a better job of tracking things in the future. You may have to do this over and over for some kids. Patient persistence rather than angry frustration is the emotional tone to set for repeated discussions. For kids who are going to college, laying out the process of college applications is a perfect opportunity to practice this skill.

Social skills. Soon, your kid will have to speak for themselves, stand up for themselves, and play well with others without your help. They should appreciate the importance of manners for how others view them and how others treat them. Do they have adequate greeting skills? Can they express their frustration in an appropriate way? Can they work with people they don't particularly like? Do they set limits on the demands of others? Can they pursue (and hold onto) their own priorities even in the face of social pressure? Are they able to encourage others and move situations in a more positive direction? Your kid will need to be able to express frustration or anger in a productive way. They will need to be able to deal with problems cooperatively (i.e., without either saying "forget it" or try to bully others into doing what they want). Being assertive rather than aggressive (or passive) is one of those important skills kids need practice to learn. People will try to push your kid around and have them compromise their values or beliefs. They will need to practice setting personal boundaries, especially in high pressure situations. Finally, your high school senior could benefit from knowing how important THEIR attitude is in effecting how things turn out (both when dealing with others and when dealing with just themselves). Talk with them about these abilities. Encourage them to practice them on you and

family members. (Younger siblings are particularly helpful in appropriate expressions of anger and working cooperatively with an annoying coworker.)

Independence (aka, the opportunity to screw up). Older adolescents need to screw up; it is part of the process of testing their own personal boundaries and establishing their own personality. The key is to try to have them screw up without potentially devastating consequences (i.e., addiction, unwanted pregnancies, arrests, serious bodily injury, destroying important personal relationships, etc.). To screw up, they will need to have some room to do it. Do you still decide when and how your kid should study? Does your kid have to ask you if they can go do something with friends? Do you have to approve of every place your kid goes? It is time to begin letting your kid set some of their own boundaries. Your role will be to hold them accountable for the boundaries they set. “What time are you going to be coming home tonight?” rather than “You need to be home by 12 so that you can get your sleep.” When they tell you a time, they have to stick to it. If the time seems unreasonable, they have to convince you it is necessary (or they can handle it). If they think they can handle it, y’all will talk about how to tell if they are not handling it (which you will monitor and address if things start to move in that direction). They should keep you informed of their plans rather than have to get your permission. This allows you to ask the questions they should be asking themselves. This is also practice keeping someone informed of their general plans in case something goes wrong.

Self discipline. Being able to put off immediate desires for long term goals is a crucial skill. Does your kid pass on fun things when they have assignments due? Do they make sure they follow through on commitments no matter what? Do they recognize when they are letting things begin to drift? Do they reign themselves in when responsibilities suffer? Require them to identify their priorities. When they appear to be about to sacrifice priorities, raise questions (rather than set limits).

“Hey, you’ve been running around a lot lately. Have you been keeping up with your reading for class?”

“It’s not that important. I’ll be able to pull it out. The grade won’t really affect my college applications anyway.”

“Yeah, maybe, but part of your responsibility is to keep up your schoolwork. Tell me your plan for getting this taken care of.”

It is worth talking directly with your kid about the importance of practicing self-discipline. Have them give you a recent example of when they used it. Have them identify how they will know if they begin to let their priorities slide. (And, if they are letting priorities slide, reign them in for a little while. Then, after they show some restraint and balance, let them reign out again to see if they got it.)

Decision making. Making good decisions. This may be the core skill that determines how well your kid makes it through emerging adulthood. Do they weigh the long term consequences of their actions? Can they accurately assess the potential risks of a course of action? Do they put more weight on reason (rather than emotions) in making decisions? Do they seek out and take advice? Pay close attention to how effectively your kid makes decisions. Have your kid talk to you about how they are deciding specific issues that arise. Ask them about what they plan on doing about alcohol and drug use, sex, personal safety, and risk taking in general. This is the time to try to shift your role from that of decider and punisher to advisor and consultant. You

have a wealth of experience and knowledge that could benefit them in their decision making. They won't make use of it if you come across as critical, controlling, or judgmental. Talk in terms of morals, fundamental values, balance, and hard choices. Help them think all the way through the potential outcomes of different options, both the ones you prefer they take and the ones you don't. When their decisions turn out to be bad one, sit down with them and review how they might have anticipated it (and how they might do it differently the next time).

Living with integrity. Are your kid's actions guided by a set of strongly held morals or values? Do they hold themselves to a high standard? Do they keep their word? Do they take responsibility for their actions? Do they respect the rights of others? Are they honest? Keep pounding away at the importance of a moral life if they haven't internalized these values yet. Think in terms of helping them understand why it is to their benefit. (Focusing on the moral rightness or wrongness of behavior is effective for teaching your kids the importance of values at younger ages.)

Personal spiritual beliefs. This is the phase in teen's lives when religious beliefs drop to the bottom of the priority list. Deciding whether to attend religious observances will soon be up to them. It is also a time of religious questioning. Despite this religious dry spell, the majority of young adults actually return to religious beliefs during their late twenties. Will your kid attend religious services if you didn't make them? Do spiritual issues (e.g., prayer, contemplation, religious observances or rituals, etc.) have a place in their daily life? Find out about your kid's religious beliefs. Talk about what is required of a person of faith. It can also be useful to talk about how to keep a balance between the secular and spiritual.

Opportunities to give some attention to these developmental skills are appear throughout your kid's decisions and experiences during their senior year. Relax some of your structuring and directing to see how well your kid uses these skills. Focus on shoring up the skills that are not sufficiently well developed. Praise your kid for the ones they have acquired. (It also never hurts to pray for divine intervention.) Take this time to help prepare them for their first run at independence when you can still offer some guidance.

Countdown to College: Part One-Practicing Independence

"I'm going to hang out this weekend. I'll see you on Monday."

"Wait. What? What do you mean you'll see me on Monday? You are NOT staying gone all weekend!"

"When I'm at college in a couple of weeks, you won't even know if I ever come back in!"

"The ink isn't dry on your diploma, you aren't leaving for 2 ½ months and right now you're living at home! As long as you live under my roof . . ."

Whether they know it or not, entering college will present your kid with a slew of challenges: actual freedom, insecurity, loneliness, homesickness, establishing an identity with peers, developing a young adult identity, access to alcohol & drugs, opportunities for casual sexual relationships, true personal responsibility (and the obligations that go along with it), few external sources of accountability, sharing a room with someone new, setting clear personal boundaries, managing time, balancing competing demands, self-restraint, self-discipline, money management. The list goes on and on.

So, how do you try to prepare them for the challenges that await them? How do you deal with your kid's insufferable belief that they are now a fully grown adult with no need for parents (except to pay for all their expenses and supporting resources, of course)? It is a lot easier to just keep a tight reign on them across the summer until you ship them off. However, if you do you will miss the opportunity to prepare them for the transition from having limits set for them to setting limits for themselves.

Here are some things to consider as y'all negotiate your way through the long, hot summer.

Lots of talking, even more listening. Make sure you have ongoing conversations with your teen across the summer about the things they will face at college. Talk about goal setting and planning, responsibility, time management, STUDYING, social aspects of college, sex, alcohol and drugs, relationships, risks and dangers, etc. You will probably have to arrange the time for talking and bring up the topics yourself. Wade right in. Don't accept their attempts to side step it or blow it off. Ask a lot of questions before you offer any comments or advice (e.g., "Have you thought what you are going to do about . . ." "What do you plan to do about . . ."). Require them to contribute to the conversation. You need to find out what your kid is thinking and what they know (and don't know).

Practice freedom. As it turns out, it really is important for your kid to have some experience with freedom before you unleash them. Consider giving them a freer hand during the summer with how they spend their time, how they set their priorities, and, God help you, when they come in at night.

Practice responsibility. There are many responsibilities your kid will be acquiring when they go off to college. They are responsible for managing their priorities, money, the impact of their behavior on others, decision making and managing their own affairs in general. Require them to be more responsible for managing their lives. This means having them determine things like curfew and managing their money (e.g., shifting to bi-weekly or monthly allowances including gas money to start learning how to track expenses, etc.). This also means that y'all will be reviewing how they handle responsibilities.

Goal setting and planning. This won't be much of an issue if you have already been working with your kid on fulfilling responsibilities, goal setting, and planning (or if you have one of those naturally organized, compliant kids). If not, sit down with your kid at the beginning of the summer and have them

lay out their summer plans. In addition to personal goals, their plans should include responsibilities around the house and to the family, obligations to others (namely, you) and college preparations (e.g., orientation, getting everything together). Rather than laying it out for them, direct the conversation in a way that requires THEM to identify their goals and the timeline for accomplishing them. Then add in anything you think they might have missed. Set specific dates for when goals are to be accomplished and to review progress. When the date arrives, call a meeting. You are going to be the mechanism for accountability.

Short term consequences and reset privileges. Once your kid has established their own priorities and structure (with your agreement), hold them accountable for sticking to the plan. If they are irresponsible (defined by violating their own rules), you will step in and pull back their freedoms. Have a discussion. Ground them for a week while y'all refine their plans. Talk about why the plans fell through (or what is unacceptable). Have them refine their plans. (And refining doesn't mean that they just remove any expectations so they aren't accountable.) After a week, let them loose again with the understanding that they are accountable for the plans (and limits) they have identified.

Time management. How much sleep do they need? How are they going to balance their responsibilities with having fun? If there aren't any naturally occurring responsibilities, assign some. These will be a way to test their readiness (so be sure to tell them it's a test). Neglecting responsibilities is a sign they are not ready to manage their own affairs. That means mommy and daddy have to step in. Review the problems that have arisen with how they have managed their time. They must demonstrate improvements during a week of being reigned in by curfew and activities. If they demonstrate "maturity" (i.e., not whining, showing you they are responsible and accountable for their commitments) let the leash out again.

Once you have the structure in place for helping your kid practice greater freedom and responsibility, there are some specific conversations that are worth having regarding sex, alcohol and drugs, and risky or outright dangerous situations.

Countdown to College: Part Two-Alcohol and Drugs

Once you have set expectations for the summer in the run up to college, there are a number of conversations that are worth having with your newly young adult child. The percentage of college age people who binge drink alcohol (5 or more drinks in one setting) in the previous month is 41%. Thirty eight percent rode with a driver who had been drinking. Twenty seven percent drank and drove in the previous month. Seventeen percent smoked marijuana in the previous month. (Statistical tables for every kind of drug can be found at http://monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/vol2_2008.pdf)

Guess who has the most influence on kid's decisions to drink or use drugs? Parents. But you have to get in there to influence their awareness and decision making. Here are some questions you can ask your teen to get that conversation started. It will also provide an opportunity for you to revisit your expectations regarding alcohol or drug use.

How much alcohol does it take to raise your blood alcohol content past the legal limit?

In order to drink responsibly, your kid will need to know how alcohol affects them. Start by requiring them to know how much each "drink" (1/2 oz liquor or 1 beer) affects them across time. You can play a fun game where your kid tries to predict their BAC (blood alcohol content) after different amounts of alcohol across different amounts of time! Won't that be fun! Here's a site that has a calculator: <http://www.bloodalcoholcalculator.org/>. As a rule, the liver can process about an ounce of alcohol an hour (hence the ability to predict, fairly accurately, your blood alcohol content depending on gender, body weight, amount of alcohol, and time passed). It can be useful to show your daughter how differently alcohol affects women compared to men. If they try to keep up, they will be in serious trouble.

What's the legal limit for alcohol intoxication? Drug intoxication?

The goal of asking some of these questions is to make a point (in addition to any knowledge gained). The answer to this question is "any amount of alcohol" if you are under the age of 21. The presence of alcohol in any concentration or possession of alcohol is against the law. At 21, Tennessee law defines legal intoxication as .08 BAC or higher. Any of the recreational drugs your kid might use will almost certainly be illegal in any amount. Possession is a crime; for some substances, a federal crime.

How much alcohol does it take for people to start dying from alcohol poisoning?

Death begins to occur when someone's blood alcohol content approaches or exceeds .30. Make them calculate how much alcohol it would take for them to reach that level. An argument presented by some kids is that they can still be perfectly fine at that BAC level or higher. On the one hand, this kind of direct and honest communication is a good sign of trust in your relationship. On the other hand, this means that your kid has a natural tolerance (e.g., biological factors), has a body that doesn't signal when they have consumed a lethal amount of alcohol and so are at risk of dying without realizing it, or they have been drinking so much that their body has developed a tolerance for high volumes of alcohol. None of these are good news. This may be a time to consult for strategies to deal with your kid's alcohol abuse or addiction. <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/factsAboutAlcoholPoisoning.aspx>

If you decide to drink, what's your personal limit?

It is very important for kids to have thought about when to stop drinking once they start BEFORE they start. This question is about what they are looking to get from drinking (and how they may need to set limits to avoid bad outcomes). They should establish personal limits on an upper limit of alcohol at any one time, how frequently they drink, and when they will never use (e.g., when driving, major exams, unfamiliar hangouts, etc.).

<http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/tipsForCuttingDownonDrinking.aspx>

What drugs (or alcohol, for that matter) are completely off limits and will result in a campus visit by us pulling a trailer to pack your things to bring you home for rehab?

It is always a good idea to make your expectations clear. In this area, the threat of punishment and the disruption of their college experience can be a powerful inducement for them to regulate their risky behavior. This is to open up a discussion on the range of drugs that may be available to your kid.

What do you think we will do if we get a phone call from anyone (campus police, local police, the Feds, concerned friends, bitter enemies, etc.) that there has been drinking, drug use, rudeness, etc.?

It's like a cry for help: "Please mommy and daddy, I want to live at home and go to school around here. I miss those evenings where we all watched Dancing with the Stars as a family and I had a curfew." Next.

What are the primary signs of an out of control party and what is your exit strategy?

The prevalence of binge drinking on college campuses means that parties or gatherings are going to get out of control. Researchers have found that people end up being antisocial, assaultive or destructive when small, everyday social norms are ignored by the people around them. An out of control party can be like the beginning of a forest fire during a drought; it starts out slow on the other side of the hill then suddenly you are surrounded by fire. Some of the signs of impending trouble include wide spread serious drunkenness or drug intoxication, people beginning to vomit or relieve themselves in public, casual public sexual activity especially with nudity, open use of serious drugs (e.g., cocaine, prescription pills, etc.), property destruction, fights breaking out, and observing multiple instances of personal boundary violations (e.g., guys cornering girls, threatening or intimidating statements being thrown around, etc.). Things will end up badly even in the rarified clime of a college campus. Talk to your kid about how they plan on protecting themselves in these situations.

How do you know when your alcohol or drug use is a problem?

Your kid needs to have already identified the criteria for an alcohol or drug use problem before it happens. Here are some of the symptoms that treatment professionals use to identify the presence of substance abuse or addiction.

- Do you drink or use drugs alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking or drug use ever make you late for class or interfere with completing assignments?
- Do family or friends make comments that show they are worried about your drinking?
- Do you ever drink or use drugs after telling yourself you need to stop?

- Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking or using drugs?
- Do you get headaches or have a hang-over after you have been drinking or using drugs?

See what I mean? It's like the description of a typical game-day college party. Each of these is a sign of a possible substance use disorder. If these signs start to pile up . . . Make sure your kid knows that these are the signs that they have a problem (which can also help to insure they will back off when they notice these showing up).

What will happen if you get caught with alcohol or drugs at school?

Look up the college's alcohol and drug policy. Your kid will tell you they aren't enforced. Call the campus police and ask for information about how many alcohol and drug arrests have been made on campus. You step off campus and it is local police. The law is the law.

What is your safety plan if you decide to use?

Your kid needs a plan to keep themselves safe if they are under the influence. This would include setting limits on drinking, having a designated sober person, making sure the place they are drinking is safe, insuring a safe return to their dorm (e.g., not alone). Young women are the most vulnerable when under the influence so this is a particularly important discussion to have with them.

When has there been a time you refused to drink (same for drugs) when others were using?

If your kid can't tell you about a time when others were using and they weren't, you have cause for concern.

What are 3 ways to say "no" to alcohol or drugs?

Refusal skills can be useful. Most kids don't have a clue as to how to refuse gracefully. Practice makes perfect. "No thanks." "Thanks anyway but I have to keep a clear head for class tomorrow." "Here, you drink mine for me." "I'm the designated driver/escort." Don't forget the value of a substitute nonalcoholic drink ("Thanks, I'm still working on this one.")

When my wife proof read this column, she had a panic attack thinking about our kids being faced with these situations (even though they are both well into their college years). So, keep in mind that these questions represent a way to help your kid be prepared for possible worst case scenarios. There is more to discuss with your kid regarding alcohol and drug use than they will probably tolerate ("Aw, Dad! Give me a break!"). You can't cover everything. Pick and choose and add anything that occurs to you. Raising awareness about these issues is the most important part.

Here are a couple of websites that have lots of useful information about alcohol and drug use:

<http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/StatsSummaries/snapshot.aspx>

<http://www.centurycouncil.org/learn-the-facts/underage-drinking-stats>

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/>

Countdown to College: Part Three-Personal Safety

Awareness of personal safety is another of the conversations to have with your kid before they head off to college. Hopefully, you have been able to provide a relatively safe environment to raise your kid. If you have, they don't really know how to identify truly dangerous situations. (You think my wife freaked out thinking about the alcohol and drug use conversation, you should have seen her reaction to this one. Guess who had these conversations with my kids?)

How do you know if a party is getting dangerous?

A party getting wild and out of control is one thing. A party becoming dangerous is another thing altogether. The key is for your kid to be able to tell the difference. While extreme drunkenness (or drug abuse) or even a fight breaking out increases the odds of things becoming dangerous, these things alone aren't enough to constitute a threat to personal safety. On the other hand, someone wanting to fight YOU is. You can't know how far someone will go when they want to fight you. Protecting your pride is not one of the things worth dying for. It's time to leave. While a group of friends being obnoxious and roughhousing is not dangerous, the presence of people known to be associated with gangs is. They may be cool in music videos but in real life they're violent and unpredictable. Don't stick around to find out. If you have a daughter, even one guy who won't take "no" for an answer and who repeatedly tries to get her alone or physically corner her is also a sign of potential danger. Finally, there is no reason for anyone to be armed (e.g., gun, knife, baseball bat, etc.) at a party so either they know something others don't and it's time to leave or your kid now knows enough to know it's time to leave.

When should you fight someone?

In a civilized society, people are supposed to settle their differences with words or through the legal system. What if words aren't enough and the police aren't around? When should your kid duke it out? Very, very rarely. Before they do, there are some things they should consider. First, your kid better know how to fight because the other person may. For your daughters, they should avoid being physically aggressive (e.g., slapping someone, shoving, etc.) except in self-defense. If it is a guy, she is likely to be out weighed, out muscled, and out fought. If it's another girl, her opponent better be a prissy, preppy chick otherwise it is likely to get very ugly and potentially dangerous. Second, unless your kid is fighting their best friend, it better be worth risking their life. Guys can't afford to posture for the sake of their reputation. They can never know how far the other person will go. If their opponent begins to win, will they stop before really hurting your kid? There is an appalling frequency of intentional kicks to the head if you go down in a fight. If your kid wins will their opponent go get backup (e.g., weapons, friends) and try to settle the score? Third, one of the combatants may accidentally kill or seriously injure the other (e.g., hitting their head on something, delivering an unexpectedly lethal blow, etc.). Fourth, you can be charged with assault no matter how the fight turns out. That's time in court, money, and a criminal record. The answer, by the way, is only fight if you are defending their life and there is no other way out of it.

How do you deal with someone who is becoming aggressive or threatening at a party?

If someone threatens your kid with bodily harm, the best strategy is for them to back away and then get away. Cede the territory. This doesn't make for a successful action film character but it does make for an uncomplicated and trouble free college life. When everyone sobers up

things usually calm down. (It is more complicated if this is a repeated occurrence. While the details of dealing with this kind of persistent threat among members of a community are beyond the scope of today's column, getting peacemaker friends of both parties together to work it out can sometimes solve that issue.)

What is the best way to deal with your nagging feeling that something is wrong?

Pay attention to it. Intuition is a primitive, highly effective survival mechanism. It can be wrong but is worth respecting. I'm not saying your kid should take off running if they get the feeling there is a threat. Instead, talk to them about standing up straight and appear alert and calm while looking around. If your kid gets the vibe from someone they are interacting with, they should politely but firmly disengage from the person and move off to be with people they know. If they are in an isolated place, scan the environment while moving to a public place with lots of other people. If they see someone who appears to be watching them, have them practice assuming a "suspicious" expression (draw the eyebrows together, squint the eyes, tilt the head) while briefly looking right at the person and then deliberately and confidently go about their business. (Someone stalking your kid takes more than this and is a topic for a future column.)

What is the best way to get someone to help you if you are in trouble?

Make noise. Holler "HELP", pull fire alarms, honk horns, set off car alarms. However, to actually get someone to help you may need to ask them directly. There is some very interesting research on the reactions of people in a crowd during an emergency. When more than one person is around in a crisis, everyone waits for the next person to do something. If your kid is in trouble and needs help when other people are around, here are a couple of things they can do to increase the likelihood of someone actually helping. First, make eye contact with a specific person in the crowd. Second, identify them by some characteristic (e.g., "You, in the blue jacket"). Third, ask them directly for help (e.g., "Call 911" "Help get this guy off me!").

What should you do if you are being robbed?

Give the criminal any possession they want. Make it easy and quick for them to take it and go. Your possessions are just things and you don't know how desperate or coldhearted the criminal is. Don't go anywhere with someone who is threatening you. Criminals don't like public places. It is better to take your chances where you are than to be taken to some isolated place where you could end up dead.

What are some basic safety rules?

Make sure you surround yourself with people you know. When in an unfamiliar setting, have a mutual commitment with a friend to hang together (no matter how hot that girl/guy they just met is). Don't wander around in isolated places or sketchy areas. Have an escape plan if things start to get out of hand (that means don't leave alone). Have a designated driver or sober friend if you are not in a familiar and safe place (a local bar doesn't count). Finally, your kid will need to be able to say firmly and directly "No", "Stop" or "Leave me alone" and mean it.

You can't protect your kids from the world. You can't get them to sit quietly in the house so you can make sure they are safe. You can help them think through how to have a good time without taking unnecessary or foolish risks. Make sure they know how to think in terms of their own safety and potential risky situations. Then get ready for the sleepless nights ahead.

Countdown to College Part Four-Sexual Decision Making

Love, intimacy, rejection, lust, heartbreak, carnal pleasure; there's so much for your college bound kid to learn and experience in the months ahead. This is the fourth and final column on some of the discussions worth having with your older teen as they prepare to take off for college. As such, there are several aspects of sexual decision making they should probably review. Here are some questions to ask your kid that will frame the conversation.

What are your morals about sex (i.e., when do you think it is right and when is it wrong)?

These kinds of conversations don't seem to take place any more. Have your kid identify their sexual morals? Even if they are just telling you what you want to hear, it can have an effect on their sexual decision making in college.

What are your criteria for having sex?

Having morals doesn't automatically mean your kid will wait until marriage to have sex. Have them talk about what they require of a person and in a relationship before becoming sexually intimate. Find out about their REAL criteria are for the right time to have sex. How committed are they to these conditions? What will they do if a very attractive person is interested in having casual sex with them? (This leads to the questions about pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and date rape presented below.)

What kind of protection do you plan on using if you decide to have sex?

Talking about safer sex doesn't mean you are telling them to have sex. Ignoring the possibility that they may change their mind about abstinence leaves the consideration of protecting themselves unexamined. Sexually active teens who don't use contraception have a 90% chance of becoming pregnant in a year. It's time to talk (again?) about contraception with your kid. Make them look you in the eye and tell you how they plan on being sexually responsible and protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. Require them to make a firm commitment to you that they will either use a condom or not have sex at all.

What are the most prevalent sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

Syphilis, gonorrhea and crabs were the big sexually transmitted infections when we were teens. Then came HIV. There's a new kid on the block that is much more pernicious: HPV, a.k.a., genital warts. It can be spread even if there is no outward sign of infection, it is linked to cervical cancer, and can be passed on to a newborn child during birth. It is estimated that each time someone has unprotected sex with an infected individual there is a 40-60% risk of acquiring the infection. Make sure your kid is educated. If you are going to use scare tactics, they might as well be accurate. Here's a link for more information about STIs your kid should know about: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/stds-hiv-safer-sex-101.htm>

How can you tell if someone is uninfected?

You can tell by looking, right? If someone will have sex with your kid on a whim, they may also have had sex with other people on a whim. How many other people have been part of that sexual daisy chain? The opportunity for casual sex in an open society means that you don't know who has been there before. The cost of this freedom is that kids have to consider

unpleasant possibilities and their own sexual health. It will be important to encourage your kid to take a close hard look at real world risks. The only way you can tell is by being tested.

How do you deal with someone trying to pressure you into having sex?

Your kid needs to be able to say “no” and mean it. This is both girls AND guys. You can tell a lot about someone by how they respond to “no.” Your kid will also benefit from thinking through how to get themselves out of an uncomfortable situation. How will they put someone off (e.g., “This is not a good time right now,” “Thanks but I have to go find my friend,” etc.)? How will they decline an offer for sex without insulting the other person (e.g., “I just don’t feel right about it,” “I don’t really know you well enough to risk having a baby with you,” etc.)? Or, just say “no.”

What is the one condition that is most likely to lead to you having unplanned sex?

Alcohol or drug use. Intoxication and sex don’t mix (or, rather, they seem to go together all too well). Judgment is impaired and inhibitions are lowered leading to mixed signals or bad judgment.

What will you do if you get pregnant (if the girl is pregnant, both are pregnant)?

Contraception can fail. The Russian roulette of unprotected sex will catch up with you. Have them talk about what they plan to do should a pregnancy occur. Follow each possible option through into the future: abortion, adoption, or raising the child. Be detailed. How will it affect each of the people involved, including you? Remind your son that they have no say in whether or not the pregnancy is carried to term and that they are financially responsible for the fruit of their loins whether or not they want the baby. Talk to your daughter about being forever bound to a child’s father and his family.

What do you think we will expect of you (and what we will and won’t do) if you get pregnant?

Lots of grand parents are raising grandchildren. Even if you know you will care for the child if necessary, talk at length about how you “ain’t raisin’ no more babies.” If your kid thinks that they will be moving back into your house with their newborn infant or that you will take care of the kid while they go on about their life, getting pregnant might not be such a big deal. Talk about the need for your kid to get a job to support their newborn. Push hard on the “you got yourself into this, you’ll have to deal with it” outcomes of unplanned pregnancy. You want them thinking about how it will impact their life before it impacts their life.

What do you know about date rape?

Most kids think of date rape as some brutish guy taking a girl to some isolated place and forcing her to have sex. It turns out that the problem is much broader and hazier than that. Here are some of the things your kid, especially your son, should know. Being just a little too sexually aggressive can cross the line. If someone says “no”, any subsequent sexual activity with them can constitute date rape. If someone pushes your kid away, even without saying “no,” and your kid continues to try to kiss (i.e., sexual assault) or having sex (i.e., rape) that person, your kid could be committing date rape in the eyes of the law. It doesn’t matter how coy or playful someone is when they say “stop” or indicates they want you to stop. If they are uncomfortable with what is happening, your kid can be charged with (and potentially successfully prosecuted

for) date rape. If your kid's sexual partner has consumed even a small amount of alcohol or drugs, the law says they have a diminished capacity to make decisions. Anything your kid does with them sexually can be considered date rape, even if your kid didn't know they were under the influence. Sex crime convictions lead to your name being added to a national data base that follows you the rest of your life.

So here are a few guidelines to suggest. They should really know the person they are having sex with. Misunderstandings and miscommunications are a lot less likely if you actually know the person. "No" means no. Stop when someone indicates they are in any way uncomfortable or an unwilling participant. If someone is hesitant about sexual activity, don't try to talk them into it. If there is even the possibility that someone has been drinking or using drugs (even marijuana), don't have sex with them.

Have you thought much about keeping your sex life private?

One final consideration in these days of digital media and miniaturization is the prospect of someone video recording your kid's intimate moments. For most people, sex is a personal, private experience. Your kid needs to be aware that not everyone shares this sensibility and may be keeping a personal record of their conquests to be shared with friends or the world. Stories abound of people having sexual encounters posted on the internet without their permission. Make sure your kid has thought about how to keep private moments private. If they think some sexual performance art could be thrilling, it is important to run that little experimentation out into the future so that they can appreciate the ways it can haunt them into adulthood.

Countdown to College Part Five-Self Care

Not every kid initially thrives in the excitement, freedom, independence (and chaos and debauchery) that are part of the residential college experience. Things happen that are upsetting. It can be hard for some kids to adjust to new room mates, peers or even a college environment that wasn't as good a fit as everyone expected. They can get too focused on fun and not enough on achievement. They may become too distracted by the varieties of immediately gratifying experiences of which they can avail themselves (without the observant eye of a parent to call attention to the problem). They may experience (old or new) emotional and psychological issues. They may encounter mistreatment and even assault. It can be useful for your kid to know the signs that something is a potential problem and what to do if problems arise.

Depression, anxiety or worse

Anxiety, depression and stress are the top three reasons college kids visit the college counseling center. Does your kid know how to recognize if they are struggling with their feelings? Take some time to talk with them about how to recognize if they are experiencing a debilitating level of anxiety, depression or stress. Make sure you talk with them about what to do if they find themselves struggling with these feelings (i.e., call you!). If they are thinking death would be a relief or about taking their own life, you should have an agreement that they will contact you immediately. It is better to have the conversation end up being unnecessary than taking for granted things are ok and being catastrophically mistaken. Here are quick quizzes for [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and [stress](#). The best resource would be having them contact their college counseling center for psychological support. Don't be surprised, though, if your kid has difficulty getting an appointment. College counseling centers have increasingly been overwhelmed by students seeking help so you may have to figure out how to get support through others resources until an appointment opens up.

Substance use problems

You will have already talked with your kid about substance use and abuse when at college. But, they will also need to know how to tell if they have a problem. TWEAK is a five-item scale developed originally to screen for risk drinking. It is an acronym for the questions below that were modified from [Russell, 1994](#):

Tolerance—"How many drinks can you hold?"/"How much of a substance can you handle at one time?"

Worried—"Have close friends or relatives worried or complained about your substance use?" or, alternatively, "Have you gained a reputation for being a heavy user?"

Eye-opener—"Do you sometimes use in the morning when you first get up?"

Amnesia—stands for blackouts—"Has a friend or family member ever told you about things you said or did while you were using that you could not remember?"

K/Cut Down—"Do you sometimes feel the need to cut down on your substance use?"

The more questions your kid answers yes to, the more serious the substance use problem.

Talk about what your kid thinks they should do if they show any of these symptoms. One thing they should do is let you know. (I know, I know; it's optimistic. But, if you can get them to either let you know or if you can get them to answer honestly when you ask, it is GOLD!)

Keeping up with school

It is extremely difficult to find a balance between getting an education and taking advantage of all the exciting, fun, captivating opportunities that exist when you cram thousands of teens and young adults together into a small area who are away from home with lots of time on their hands. Of course they are going to make the right decisions! But, if they don't? Have some pointed discussions about how your kid can tell if they are tilting out of balance. What is too much: too much fun, too much video gaming, too much time socializing?

Then there are actual problems with school work. It is important for them to have already given some thought to the indications that school is harder than they thought (hint: not "wait until the end of the semester to see how it turns out"). More importantly, what should they do about it? Do they know about all the academic resources on campus?

Privacy and Personal Boundaries

Sharing a room at college may be the first time your kid has faced limitations to their privacy and the need to set personal boundaries with someone who mom and dad can't make listen. Respect for another person's boundaries is crucial in communal living. Having a room mate who considers what is yours is theirs can create resentment, stress and conflict. It can be shocking to find out how disgusting other people can be. Talk with your kid how to address boundaries issues with a room mate or peers.

This is particularly true for times when someone has a dating partner stay over. Your kid will probably have no experience thinking about all the complications and social dynamics of sleeping with someone (e.g., what can be overheard, what is considered too intrusive to say or do). How will they be considerate of their roommate's privacy needs (including their possible discomfort with people having sex right next to them!) And, with recording technology on phones or other devices being constantly at hand, illicit recordings as a "prank" (or for more malicious purposes) are a possibility. These are all topics worthy of at least a mention in discussions about the upcoming semester.

Injury or Assault

What should your kid do if they are seriously injured? How will someone know to contact you? Have they completed the emergency medical id information on their mobile phone? Does their roommate and close friends have your contact information? Do you have the contact information of their roommate? Close friends? Resident Dorm Assistant?

What should your kid do if they are attacked? Do they know how to activate an emergency call on their [apple](#) or [android](#) smart phone? Who should they call first? Second?

If it is a sexual assault, what should they do? ([RAINN](#) has a very helpful site dedicated to all aspects of sexual assault. [Peterson's](#) has a brief summary of the most important parts of what to do after being sexually assaulted.)

Loneliness

When should your kid take seriously that they are feeling lonely? Typically, entering college students have a period of about 2 weeks where they will feel homesick and uncertain about whether they have anyone to hang out with or to begin to form connections. By the second or third week, most students have been included in a social group through the natural points of interaction that occur in college (e.g., dorm mate, dorm hallway, classes, clubs, greek life events, etc.). If not, [here are some general strategies](#)

that will improve the odds of them finding their group. Something unusual is going on if they are entering their 4th week of college and are still feeling lonely. At this point they might benefit from meeting with a counselor to take a closer look at what is getting in the way of them having more satisfying relationships.

Weight changes

The “Freshman 15” (i.e., that entering college students gain an average of 15 pounds their first year) is a [myth](#). While 70% of students gain weight by the time they graduate, the average weight gain during the first year of college is 3 pounds. So, some weight gain is expected. But, gaining (or losing) a lot of weight (e.g., 10 pounds or more) is a strong indicator of an unhealthy lifestyle. Too much junk food, not enough exercise and poor sleep habits will stress the body and get it to store fat. Have a talk with your kid about giving some time and attention to healthy eating and staying active.

Losing weight through inadequate nutrition, stress or, most worrisome, through intentional calorie restriction due to body image issues is equally problematic. Weight loss (also 10 pounds or more on most body types) will interfere with concentration, energy, physical health and performance (academic and otherwise).

Involvement with the authorities

What you do as a decent, respectable citizen (e.g., be forthright with nothing to hide) is actually not what you should do if questioned or, especially, arrested by police authorities. Have a conversation about what your kid should do if they are stopped by [campus security](#) or the [police](#)? Many things can go wrong for innocent reasons. Many things can go wrong for illegal reasons. In every instance, your kid should not make it easier to be charged with a crime. It is better to be able to address these issues within your family rather than in a court of law.

One Last Thing

Your young adult child is moving into that stage of life where they assume increasing responsibility for their own growth and development. These chapters have been focused on some of the risks that accompany freedom and responsibility. Your kid's entry into this exciting time of life is worth celebrating. After you have talked to them about the ways that they can become alcoholics, drug addicts, assaulted, and infected with sexual diseases you can then talk about all the fun they are going to have as they venture forth into the big wide world of college life.