

The parent-teen relationship: Emptying the nest

Kids leaving for college or the workforce brings emotional challenges for everyone. Here's how to navigate them.

Leaving for college or the workforce is one of the most momentous times in a young person's life. But it's stressful for parents too. Imagine dropping your only child off three states away, becoming an empty nester in the process. You'd probably shed a tear too.

Sara Bennett, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare, reminds you: these feelings are normal, and you're not alone.

"Anytime we have an adjustment period, it's hard. We have a lot of mixed emotions," Bennett says. "Parents are really excited for their kids to go to college and have these opportunities. But at the same time, it's kind of sad. You start reflecting on how much time you've spent with these kids and how fast it's gone. So, there's sadness, happiness, excitement and uncertainty. There are a lot of emotions."

The transition can be even tougher if you come from a tight-knit family or a small-town high school where everyone knows everyone.

Luckily, there are ways to navigate the rough waters.

Tactics for a successful transition

- Parents should be open with their kids about how they're feeling.

"I'm excited for you, but this is hard for me. I'm going to miss you," Bennett suggests as one phrase to use.

- Set expectations.

It's a very important conversation to have, Bennett says. Is the child expected to maintain certain grades? What happens if they don't? How can they stay safe but have fun on the weekends? If that partying puts them in a tight spot, when should they call their parents for help? When should they work it out on their own? When and how often should each call or visit each other? An unexpected knock on the dorm room door from mom and dad would probably be a jolt to the system.

"I expect you to attend your classes. If you oversleep a time or two, that's fine," Bennett says, relaying another phrase parents can use. "But a lot of times, mom and dad are footing the bill for this. So, they have some skin in the game. You just want your kid to do well. You want them to be successful. Building habits in college continues that success pattern. The student can carry that through their adult years."

Another scenario: colleges often have parent weekends once or twice a school year. Tell your child ahead of time that you'd like to visit. Brainstorm things to do.

Parents should also have expectations. If the young adult gets good grades and stays out of trouble, maybe the parents give them space or even a reward.

- Create a cheat sheet of campus resources. That way the child knows where to go for things like mental health care, career coaching and social clubs. Bennett says finding like-minded friends in college can help the child feel connected to home.
- Be prepared to experience different cultures. The student might come from a small town where everyone speaks the same language, has the same religion and eats the same food. Then, they go to a big college and are exposed to much more diversity.

"How are they going to be open and respectful to new experiences and still hold on to who they are?" Bennett ponders.

Seeing a mental health provider

If emotions surrounding a child leaving the nest are too much to bear and they're impacting your daily life, Bennett says to consider seeing a mental health provider. Parents and teens can do that together or separately, or group sessions are sometimes offered. But again, the key is to make the move in advance of the child leaving.

"Counselors can help kids process emotions and teach them how they can reach out to parents and others [for help]," Bennett explains. "Sometimes kids go off to college, and suddenly they're very overwhelmed. This seemed like it was going to be a really great thing. But they find themselves a small fish in a very big pond. Or they find the workload is very different. They think they can handle four or five classes, and they find out that's a lot. They're drowning. They're not really sure where to go or what to do."

Learn more

Read more about [mental health resources](#) available at OSF that can help build life skills. Some resources, like [behavioral health navigators](#) and support groups at [hospitals like the one Bennett works at](#), are available even if you are not an OSF patient.