Adjusting to College

A Brief Guide for Parents of Students With Disabilities
Prepared by the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Disability Issues in Psychology (CDIP). The committee would like to acknowledge Dana S. Dunn, PhD, and Carrie Pilarski, PhD, for their work in developing the content of this document.

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It’s an exciting time but one that poses uncertainty—what will happen when you’re not always there to be an advocate for your child? Does your child have the skills necessary to be successful in a less structured environment without the close support of friends, family, and academic personnel often found at the high school level? In short, how can you and your child have a smooth adjustment to college?

When psychologists talk about adjustment, they are referring to the psychological processes people call upon to manage or cope with new demands or challenges. College is a positive challenge but one that can require a period of adjustment for college students and their parents.
Naturally, parents of children with disabilities want to ensure their children adjust well to college life but should also realize the importance of standing back so their children have the freedom to explore this wonderful time on their own. This short guide is a resource for you to consult as your child begins the transition from home to campus and beyond.

In college, unlike in high school, students—including those with disabilities—must independently seek out services, which are based on situational or individual needs, to maximize their level of success.

Students cannot rely on their parents but instead must learn to be their own advocates, as there is no annual review or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for college students. Unless you are a student’s guardian, you will no longer have access to information you had when your children were in high school.
How can I help my child make the transition from high school to college?

Here are a few websites to explore:

- **Going to College**, sponsored by Virginia Commonwealth University, is designed to help high school students with disabilities plan for college. Parents will find it helpful, too.

- **The Student Lounge**, designed by the University of Washington specifically for students with disabilities, has a variety of links aimed at preparing for and then succeeding in college.

- **The Center for Parent Information and Resources**, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, is a repository of information and resources related to disability and includes a link to postsecondary education.
How can I help my child make the transition from high school to college?

Here are a few resources that focus on the general transition experience and provide specific guidance for students with disabilities:


As a parent of a soon-to-be college student, are there any sources I might consult so I know what to do and not do?

Yes, here are a few helpful sources for parents:


- **You’re On Your Own (but I’m Here if You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years,** by M. Savage, 2009, New York, NY: Touchstone.
When my child decides where to apply for admission, should we visit the campuses?

Yes, absolutely.

Your child should make it a point to visit any college he or she is seriously interested in attending to explore the campus, which will provide a sense of what it is like to navigate from place to place, the time needed to do so, and so on. The visit will help your child identify any unexpected barriers and also learn about designated parking and accessibility to residence halls, classrooms, academic resources, the library, and other places on the campus. Your child may also want to learn about accessibility to the student union building as well as to various sporting events.
Will my child’s college or university have support services for students with disabilities?

Asking about such services early in the college search process is important. When you visit a campus or search a school’s web page online, look for an Office of Disability Support Services. Ask about available services, such as tutoring. Alternatively, contact the Students Services Office or the dean of students. If you still can’t find the information you need, email your questions to the Admissions Office.
Generally speaking, no, you should not intervene. In fact, many colleges and universities require a signed release from students permitting discussion between parents and faculty.

Remember, your child is maturing and should be learning to become his or her own advocate. Encourage your child to speak to instructors directly about any particular needs or desired accommodations. The Disability Support Services Office (or its equivalent) will often assist with the coordination of needed accommodations.
What about grades, studying, and choosing a major? How involved should I be?

The first year in college represents a big change.

It’s not unusual for any student, no matter how well prepared academically, to struggle a bit. Take the opportunity to discuss academic expectations during the summer before the first semester begins—and remember that grades are not the only thing that matter during college. Social adjustment is important, too.

Encourage your child to be responsible for the education he or she will soon receive. Be open minded about college majors, as students may change their majors several times before finally choosing one.
I want to check in on my child to make sure everything is okay, but I don’t want to turn into a “helicopter parent,” either. What can I do?

Your support is very important, but you should offer it in a way that gives your student some time and space.

Why not arrange for a specific time to communicate during the week with your student? Try not to speak to your child every day, but perhaps once or twice a week, or however many times your student feels the need to contact you. Email, instant messaging, or other social media are good ways to keep in touch as long as they are not overused.
When I do talk to my child, what should I ask about?

First, don’t ask if your child is homesick (rest assured that if there are any problems, your student will tell you).

Second, ask general questions, such as “What are you learning in your classes?” “What’s living in the dorm like?” “What kind of food is served in the cafeteria?”

Third, listen and encourage, but don’t ask too many questions, especially “loaded” ones (“How are you getting along with your roommate?” “Are you lonely?”).

If your child is comfortable with sharing about classes, ask for a copy of the class syllabus. This should not be used to ask about every assignment/quiz/test but as a form of encouragement on test days or a way to ask general questions about past tests. Students may forget to share specific information but may be excited when asked, especially if a class is going well.

Here are some additional resources for students with disabilities who are transitioning to college:

- Students With Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your rights and Responsibilities
- Transition of Students With Disabilities to Postsecondary Education: A Guide for High School Educators—helpful information for you and your student.
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
- Health Resources Center at the National Youth Transitions Center—an online clearinghouse on postsecondary education for people with disabilities.
Every life stage provides an opportunity to gain self-understanding. The college transition is a transition into adulthood, and persons with disabilities may find this a time of further identity development.

When I do talk to my child, what should I ask about?

Resources for learning more about social perspectives on disability and disability identity development may be helpful. Here is a brief newsletter article on themes of disability identity:


Also available are resources on the historical changes in the philosophy of disability. Current emphasis is on a social model of disability that recognizes the interactions between the environment and the individual.
I’m interested in learning more about psychology—how can I do that?

The American Psychological Association (APA) is a great place to learn about the discipline of psychology.

APA’s mission “is to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people’s lives.” One of the things APA does is to help and advocate for people with disabilities by developing and sharing a variety of resources, including materials like this one.

To learn about the discipline of psychology and the scope of APA, visit the organization’s website.

To see what resources APA has available for people with disabilities, please visit the website of the APA Disability Issues Office.

And remember that this is a period of transition for you, too.

Take the time to realize that your life is also changing. You are entering a new experience that has its own set of stresses, joys, and opportunities.
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