

Tips for Parents: Preparing Your Child for the Social Aspects of College

by Julie Rosenbluth

Your son or daughter is about to be one of the 15 million students going off to college this year. They have spent months planning for this big day, survived months of preparation for the SAT, written college applications, and sorted through the piles of colorful brochures from colleges touting their school over all others.

As parents, you do your best to support your child through the process and help them make sense of the myriad of choices available to them. Deciding which college to go to may be one of the biggest choices your child has made at this point in their lives. Before the first day of school they will have to choose where to live and what classes to take, just to name a few. Once their postsecondary education is underway, they will face an array of options, ranging from academic to social.

Like most parents, you probably have mixed feelings about your child going to college. While you're proud to see them pursuing higher education, you know you'll miss them. You know you've done a good job getting them to this point and feel pretty confident that they're prepared for this next phase of their lives. But how many of today's college-bound students are really prepared for the alcohol and other drug challenges they'll face when they enter college?

From their first day on campus, and even from their first visit to college, your child will probably face decisions that involve alcohol or other drugs. According to recent statistics, more than half of college freshman find themselves in a situation of high-risk drinking within their first week of college. In fact, over 159,000 of today's first-year college students leave school every year for alcohol or other drug related reasons.

What can you as a parent do to help them be better prepared?

As a parent, you can do a lot to help your child be better prepared for the social aspects they will face in college. As you know, drinking under age is illegal, but the facts are that many older adolescents are already experimenting with drinking and drugs. Recent studies show that over 50 percent of high school students report drinking alcohol in the past month. The incidence of high-risk drinking only increases in college, when your child finds him/herself with a new sense of freedom away from the watchful eyes of his/her parents.

Communicate

- Identify your expectations for your child about drinking. Make sure your expectations are reasonable, well thought out, and convey trust and support. Communicate those expectations before they pack their bags and leave the nest.

- Use “teachable moments” to have open and honest conversations with your child. (Watching a college football or basketball game, packing to leave, shopping for new clothes, or timely news events about drinking in college, etc.)
- Ask your child about his/her expectations and correct those that seem inflated. Many students will come to college with false pretenses, having heard stories from older brother and sisters about all the drinking and partying that takes place in college. While many students do drink, there are many others who don’t. It’s helpful if you have done some research up front to be able to provide them with a list of activities on campus that don’t involve alcohol.
- Keep the lines of communication open—now and while your child is in college. Make yourself available to them if they need to talk. They may have questions about what college will be like and may be nervous about making friends. Try to answer their questions openly and honestly. Once your child is in college, keep an open mind and remain calm, even if they tell you things that may shock you. If you express anger or judgment over their behavior, they may not feel comfortable sharing with you in the future. By putting your emotions aside and listening, you may learn a lot that will better prepare you to guide them toward healthier decisions in the future. However, pay special attention if you hear descriptions of a pattern of heavy drinking that may need intervention. Let your child know that they can always talk to you if they’re worried that their drinking is a problem. They need to know that even though you might be disappointed, you will support them in getting treatment.

Resources to Look For

There are several resources available to students to make college successful both academically and socially, without having to drink. Some things to look for include:

- Alcohol and other drug education-Many campuses offer alcohol or other drug prevention education. Activities range from alcohol-free campus social events to mandatory classes on alcohol education for all incoming freshman, and are either offered through health services, alcohol and other drug coordinators, or residential life.
- Alcohol Policy-Most schools have a written policy on alcohol use and abuse. However, how and if this policy is implemented and enforced varies by school. This can be determined by talking to students or scheduling a meeting with someone from the counseling or alcohol education department.
- Support or intervention services—If your child has a history of alcohol or other drug abuse, you may want to look at schools that offer support for recovering students. At a minimum, most schools have counselors who are available for individual counseling. Many offer support groups for students-either on campus or in the nearby community-such as AA meetings or support groups for students with a family history of substance abuse. In addition, most schools have some sort of substance-free residential options. Many

schools have substance-free halls or even full dorms, and more and more schools are creating dorms specifically for recovering students, where they can live in a supportive environment with peers who have a similar history.

Where Can I Find this Information?

- College Literature-Check the new student orientation packet or prospective student brochures. You may also want to visit your local bookstore, and find a college guide that compares schools. The Fiske Guide to Colleges and 2004 Baron's Profiles of American Colleges are both good sources.
- College Web site-A visit the school's Web site can tell you a lot of information about the larger environment on campus. Usually a visit to the student services section will provide information on clubs or organizations that your child can join, residential life, health education programs, and health services, including counseling services.
- Visit the College-By visiting the colleges your son or daughter plans to attend, you may discover information that wouldn't necessarily be listed anywhere in writing. Many schools provide tours of the college that provide parents and students the opportunity to ask questions. Visit the coffee shops, lounges and other places where students hang out. Don't be afraid to stop students on campus and ask questions about what college is like. Ask what they do when they're not in class, where they hang out, etc. Most students on campus are more than happy to oblige and will most likely paint the most accurate picture.

*Word of Mouth-Talk to other parents of students who have attended the same school your son or daughter plans to go to. Talk to your child's high school guidance counselor or other college advisor. Check the Internet for message boards, where you can read and post questions about college.

For most kids, college is a great experience-a place where they can challenge themselves in new ways and learn more about who they are and who they want to be. As parents, we want to take pleasure in this new phase in their lives and do what we can to ensure their safety and happiness, while also respecting and supporting their growing need for separation and independence while maintaining a connection.

Written by Julie Rosenbluth, director of Transitions, a new alcohol and other drug prevention initiative for juniors and seniors in high school. For more information on the program, please contact Julie Rosenbluth at 646/505-2064, or by email at rosenbluth@phoenixhouse.org. Or visit <http://www.acde.org>. Transitions is developed by the American Council for Drug Education (ACDE) and the Children of Alcoholics Foundation (COAF), the prevention affiliates of Phoenix

House.

http://www.nacac.com/p&s_steps_0504socialaspects.html