

Helping Your Student to Navigate Risk

Parenting Strategies – January 2012

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Colleges are not a safe haven from any of the ills of society. An interesting dynamic often exists on campuses because they can feel quite safe and contained, yet they have a high concentration of young people who feel invincible, the majority of whom are experiencing more freedom and less supervision than at any other time in their life. College is often a time to test limits and to experiment, and students are also often experiencing varying degrees of stress which can lead to poor decisions. While colleges have public safety or police officers, and administrators looking out for the safety and well-being of the students, the opportunities to make bad choices are multitudinous and they come at a time when students feel vulnerable, experience uncertainty, and when they might not yet have the skills, maturity, or perspectives with which to adequately cope, resist, or change the situations to which they are exposed or in which they are engaged.

Your student might:

- illegally use drugs and alcohol;

- be of legal age, but abuse alcohol;

- share prescription medicines;

- experience intense roommate or relationship conflicts that impact concentration;

- be over-involved socially or committed to co-curricular activities that interfere with time needing to be spent on academics;

- engage in promiscuous and/or unsafe sexual behavior;

- use a vehicle in a reckless manner or be a passenger with an unskilled driver;

- experience intense peer pressure from others who are making destructive choices;

- have an undiagnosed or poorly managed learning disability or mental health issue;

- be in the wrong place at the wrong time – perhaps even when criminal activity is going on;

- have limited experience managing his or her time and establishing priorities.

These occurrences are not tucked away or hidden on college campuses, but rather are apparent in a student's day-to-day life. Parents often ask, "So what quality or characteristic prevents students from engaging in bad decisions and making poor choices while at college?" There really isn't a sole quality or characteristic, but it is often the inability to effectively navigate one's independence that seems to land so many students in hot water -- and with tuition as high as it is, this learning ground is an expensive teacher.

It is often very stressful to have conversations when things are not going well. And if parent-student communication has been difficult in recent years, it won't likely improve during times of intense emotions, disappointment and challenging situations. However, you can try a different approach to lay the groundwork for new and better communication patterns between you and your student. Foremost, try to envision that your student wants to succeed and recognize that the situations that your student is experiencing at this moment do not define his or her ability to do well a week from now, a month from now, or a year from now. Consider consistently approaching your student by interacting in the following way:

1. This is what I see occurring...
2. My concerns are ...
3. What are you able to do to change the situation or pattern?
4. What is your plan B?
5. How can I help you to do what you need to do?

Once one thing happens parents often wonder – "Is my student going to fall into a pattern of poor decisions and bad choices?"

So what's a parent to do?

- Acknowledge that college isn't a safe haven and that a range of temptations and distractions exist.

- Talk with your student about strategies to extricate one's self from situations – feigning illness, having other transportation options, traveling with a friend who shares similar values, saying “no,” asking for help, etc.
- Encourage your student to utilize campus resources to get advice.
- Help your student to see options and to always have a plan A and plan B.
- Help your student to see what he or she can change.
- Discuss consequences and privileges (if necessary) – and follow-through on what you say.
- Offer your student the option of taking a break from college to develop better independent living and personal management skills, to regulate a mental health concern, to embark on an internship to give focus to academic choices, to help others in a structured volunteer program -- and then return to college after he or she has gained greater competency in navigating life.

If we do too much to ease our student's struggle or to solve the problem it is likely that our student will end up revisiting the same challenge – and rarely are the consequences or life lessons any kinder. It is through the challenge and the impact that is felt that our student will most likely learn to change his or her behavior and more effectively navigate risks.

“It is only when you exercise your right to choose that you can also exercise your right to change.” – Dr. Shad Helmstetter