



IS YOUR CHILD PREPARED FOR COLLEGE AND BEYOND... *Emotionally?*

by Michelle Kelley, LCSW

So your child is heading to college this fall. Congratulations!

For parents and high school seniors alike, this is an emotionally charged and bittersweet time. It is a time to remember and reflect on your teenager's personal, academic, athletic and extracurricular achievements and milestones from grade school through high school. It is a time to celebrate their forthcoming graduation, emerging independence and transition into young adulthood.

It can also be a time of mourning for parents who must come to grips with letting go of the beloved child in whom they have invested so much: so much time, so much hope, so much energy, so much attention, and so much worry.

While your teenager is savoring the final days of their high school career and all the traditional rites of passage that go with it -- Senior Prom, graduation ceremonies and graduation parties -- you also deserve to be recognized and commended for all you have done to prepare your child for college, and to promote and develop your child's self-reliance and independence. You have spent many hours together with your child researching and evaluating college choices, visiting college campuses, and ensuring that college applications were completed and submitted on time.

Now that these tasks are behind you, you have yet another important role and mission as a parent: ensuring that your child is emotionally prepared for college.

Emotional Intelligence: A Critical Yet Underdeveloped Skill

Today's children are growing up in an incredibly fast-paced world that allows little time for introspection or the opportunity to gain self-knowledge. Our graduating seniors appear mature, sophisticated and adult in many ways, but they have not been well-schooled in identifying, understanding and managing the emotions that govern their decision making.

In my professional experience counseling teenagers and their parents over the past 20+ years, I have observed that many outwardly successful and accomplished high school students are clueless when it comes to understanding and taking care of the emotional dynamics in their lives. This is troubling, because it is human nature for emotions to drive our actions and choices in life. Emotions, more than logic, often dictate the friends we choose, the people we date and marry, the way we spend our leisure and the careers we pursue.

Equally worrisome is that many parents do not know how to teach the crucial skills of emotional intelligence to their children. There are many reasons why this is so:

- Many -- if not most -- adults have never been educated in how to recognize and care for their own emotional needs. How can they teach a skill to their children that they have never learned or put into practice themselves?

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- Our schools do not make emotional intelligence part of the regular curricula. Our children are encouraged and expected to excel academically and athletically, but they are not offered any regular, consistent or on-going instruction in the emotional dimensions of their lives. They are not taught how to recognize and deal with difficult emotions, how to set boundaries to protect themselves in demanding or dangerous relationships, or how to apply critical thinking skills to social and dating relationships.
- Our society communicates a double standard. We are taught to believe that displays of emotion are acceptable in women but a sign of weakness in men. How ridiculous! The truth is that emotions are a sign of being human. Understanding, managing and learning how to communicate one's emotions is a sign of higher intelligence, not a sign of weakness! This is what is commonly referred to as emotional intelligence.

When your child arrives at college, he or she will be thrust into a maze of challenging new social situations, dating relationships, temptations, distractions and technology traps. Before sending your child off into this brave new world, I encourage parents to set aside time this summer to discuss and equip your child with the critical thinking and emotional intelligence skills they will need to protect their well-being and ensure their success in college and in life.

The Importance of Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking can be traced to the Socratic method of Ancient Greece. It is a process of asking questions to trigger a deeper level of thinking and understanding. It is an important skill that everyone should develop, and should be considered a part of formal education. It is imperative that your child develop and strengthen their critical thinking skills to ensure that they do not make emotion-based decisions that will undermine their prospects for success in college, life, and future careers. Your child must also learn how to understand and skillfully navigate the emotional dynamics in social and dating relationships, so as to make wise and healthy decisions for themselves and others.



Information technologies and social media enable us to communicate with others in ways that are exciting, challenging . . . and potentially dangerous. Our children are growing up in a world where a single impulsive or ill-considered posting on Facebook or Twitter can be shared instantaneously and broadly, with serious and detrimental consequences for one's career and personal well-being. Many teenagers that I have counseled do not fully grasp the long-term and potentially harmful consequences of social media communications. They do not understand that the photos, comments and personal information that they post and share with friends online may be viewed by college admissions officers, future employers and others, thereby putting their reputations, relationships and future employment prospects at risk.

How Critical Thinking Skills Can Save A Teen's Life

Critical thinking skills can be life-saving. Many of today's parents are fearful that their child will be tempted to drink and drive or drive and text, thereby jeopardizing their own safety and the safety of others. It's not enough to tell your child not to text and drive or not to get in the car with someone who has been drinking. Today's teenagers need to (1) know their options, (2) practice speaking up for themselves in uncomfortable, difficult or dangerous situations, and (3) have the confidence and discernment to speak up and when necessary, remove themselves from dangerous situations. This is where critical thinking skills can be applied.

Does your teenager know what to do if he/she were at a party where they felt uncomfortable due to some type of illegal, inappropriate, or harmful activity taking place? Your teenager needs to develop discernment and street smarts to deal with such situations, as well as the confidence to speak up and take appropriate action on his or her own behalf.

Role Playing Reinforces Critical Thinking Skills

Often times a teen has not learned or practiced the phrases and language that will help him or her to speak up confidently or walk away from a potentially dangerous situation. In difficult or uncomfortable situations, your teenager may be paralyzed by feelings of guilt or confusion that impede his critical thinking capacity and ability to act wisely and confidently. This is where role playing can help. During role playing, teenagers practice speaking up for themselves and embed key phrases into their subconscious so they can better access the language they need when the occasion calls for it.

Most teens are not able to think through or anticipate all the possible short-term and long-term outcomes and consequences of their own activity or the activity of those around them. Teenagers often harbor unconscious emotions and fears that can easily become obstacles, keeping them from making good decisions.

These are the types of conversations and discussions that parents need to be having with their teens before they set off for college -- and not just once! When I work with teens I will often do role playing to help them develop and strengthen their critical thinking skills. Knowing what to say is not enough. Your teenager must be able to speak up confidently in difficult situations. This is especially important if your child has a people pleaser personality type.

How Emotional Intelligence Can Improve the Quality of Your Teenager's Life

As stated above, emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage your emotional and social world. To succeed in college and in life, your teenager will need to know how to handle:

- Disappointments
- Break-ups
- Academic struggles
- Difficult social situations & difficult personality types
- Technology traps

Possible Obstacles to Developing Emotional Intelligence

- Fragile self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Insecurity



Next Steps: Preparing Your Child for the Emotional Demands of College

- If you haven't already done so, initiate a conversation with your child about the topics discussed above. Be casual and friendly; nothing turns a teen off more than making a big deal out of something.
- Be a calm and supportive presence in your teen's life. Avoid being critical or judgmental. You want to be the person your child turns to when they need help.
- If your child already struggles with anxiety or depression, don't assume these symptoms will go away on their own. Seek out professional and compassionate help before they leave for college.
- Enroll your teenager in a course or seminar that will help foster these very important tools. There are many worthwhile programs available and will be beneficial during their development into adulthood.

Even though your teenager may be eager to break free of your supervision and involvement in her life, you still have an important role to play in supporting and guiding their decision making. Teens heading off to college are most likely experiencing a mixture of excitement and anxiety about what's to come. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they still need your love, guidance and support. Make sure your child is well equipped to handle life's difficult moments. They are meant to be speed bumps -- not road blocks.

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