

Mental Health Tips for Teens Graduating from High School

National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day: May 9

This year for National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) focuses on transitions of teens graduating from high school.

This is a time of excitement and adventure for many young people, but also a time filled with uncertainty. In addition, the end of high school means transitions to college, into jobs, into the military, or out of the foster care system. All of these situations bring up things to think about regarding general well-being, health concerns and diagnoses, and medications.

Your child's pediatrician can be a wonderful source of advice on helping your teen to transition successfully. The AAP offers the following tips for parents and youth navigating this important time of life.

Advice for Parents/Guardians of Teens and Young Adults

1. Is your child [headed to college](#)? Know what to do to support your teen emotionally as he ventures out into the world and away from home base.
2. Make sure that your teen has medical coverage after high school and teach your teen how to access and use it. Many teens and young adults are covered under their parents' health insurance through age 25.
3. If your teen is going to college, check into the health and mental health support services on campus, and make sure he is familiar with them.
4. In addition to making sure that the graduating patient has all of the vaccines and other preventive health care recommended for this stage of life, pediatricians also can help families to ensure they are preparing the way for their young adult's continuing mental and emotional health.
5. If your teen has mental health needs, develop a plan of care in advance of your teen moving away from home. For college, this can take several weeks or months to develop. Does your child have a mental health diagnosis, such as ADHD, depression, eating disorder, etc? Be sure to ask the health center staff what kind of medical information they will need related to your teen, and how to set up prescription refills if needed.
6. With your teen, communicate with college or university staff about their [accommodations for teens with ADHD](#) and other diagnoses. In addition, consider contacting the college's Disabilities Office, Academic Advising Office, or Student Affairs Office to determine what accommodations are available for ADHD and other diagnoses.
7. Once your teen is settled into the college routine, keep in close contact and try to get frequent readings about how he is doing academically and socially. This is especially important during the first month or so while teens are still trying to settle in and may not have made friends yet.
8. Do you have a child in foster care who is "graduating" out of the system? Depending on state laws, children in foster care are covered under Medicaid until age 18 or 21 and may need to transition to a different provider. Some may need to transition even earlier to an adult or Transitional Aged Youth mental health provider. Young adults transitioning out of the foster care system need help in identifying caring adults-- related or not-- from whom they can seek advice, support, and reassurance.
9. Is your teen going straight to [work rather than college](#)? Even though she may be remaining at home for a time, her life will change dramatically from when she was in the structured environment of

high school, having daily contact with friends. Be sure to give her extra space as a young adult, but realize that she may need help navigating adult responsibilities like bill paying, taking on her own health care, etc. She may be missing her high school life and friends who have moved on. Encourage her to keep up her friendships and to form new ones through work or other interesting activities.

10. Alcohol, drugs and sexual activity may become more accessible at this time. Be clear about your expectations regarding drug and alcohol use are even though your child may not be living at home. Be sure your teen knows where to go—whether on campus or locally-- for reproductive health care. Continue to have conversations about peer pressure, good decisions, and consequences.
11. Once your teen turns 18, you'll no longer have legal access to his academic or health records. After he moves on from high school to college or work, have frequent, one-on-one conversations with your teen as a means of staying in touch.
12. It's normal for young people starting at college or moving to a new place to have days when they feel sad, homesick, or a bit lost. If these feelings persist or interfere with their ability to work, they should seek help and know that it is normal to do so. Watch for [warning signs](#) and be prepared to act.

Advice for the Young Adult

Graduating from high school is such an exciting time. For some, this may mean transitioning to a full time job. For others, it may mean heading off to college. Whatever this next stage in life brings, it's important to be in charge of your own health. Here are some tips for you to consider.

1. Participate in activities to promote your overall health. Eating right, getting enough sleep (at least 7 hours), and being active will keep you feeling energized and can reduce stress.
2. Talk with your pediatrician about when to start seeing an adult doctor. Many young adults see their pediatricians until they turn 21. Your pediatrician can provide you with guidance about choosing an adult health provider.
3. If you have a health care problem, know the facts. When going to a new doctor or clinic, you will need to provide information about your diagnosis and how you treat it.
4. If you are taking medication to treat a health care problem, know the name of the medication, how is it taken, side effects, and if you cannot have certain foods or drinks while taking the medication. Also know how and where you will go to refill prescriptions.
5. If you will no longer be living at home, know where you will go if you are having a health problem. What hospitals or clinics are close by? Is there a student health center? Talk with your parents about how your family's health insurance works, and be sure you have a card from the health plan.

Tips for the College Student

1. Be sure you are familiar with the local or campus health center and counseling center (hours of operation, services offered, fees, location) and what to do if the Center is closed (nights and weekends). Make sure you have your insurance card and know how to use it (For example, some insurance companies may only allow certain labs or may require pre-authorization for referrals.)
2. If you have a chronic health condition, make sure roommates or someone close to you know about your health condition, signs of problems, and what to do in an emergency situation. Consider having your treating physician send a report with your current status and treatment report to the Health Center. If your problem is particularly complex or challenging, consider talking with or meeting with a health center staff member before the academic year starts.
3. Studies have shown that the majority of students on campus don't use drugs and either don't drink or do so in so moderation. So you don't need to do either one to fit in. Drinking excessively can open you up to significant health risks (accidents, fights, date rape/sexual assault).

4. Find out what resources are available to support you. Often there are support groups and student services available to help address the transition to work or college. And don't forget about your family...they want to hear how you are doing!
5. It's normal for someone starting at college or moving to a new place to have days when they feel sad, homesick, or a bit lost. If these feelings last for more than a week or so or are interfering with your ability to work or enjoy your college experience, seek help. The health center or counseling center is the best place to start.

Warning Signs for Depression or Mental Health Concerns (AAP)

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Unexpected weeping or excessive moodiness
- Eating habits that result in noticeable weight loss or gain
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Paranoia and excessive secrecy
- Self-mutilation, or mention of hurting himself or herself
- Obsessive body-image concerns
- Excessive isolation
- Abandonment of friends, social groups, and favorite pastimes
- Unexpected and dramatic decline in academic performance
- Drinking excessively or using other drugs to feel better or help with sleep

Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics Healthy Children website. Mental Health and Teens: Watch for Danger Signs. Available [here](#). Accessed May 6, 2013

National Alliance on Mental Illness website. Depression in Children and Adolescents Fact Sheet. Available [here](#). Accessed May 6, 2013

National Health Care Transition Center Web Site. Heading for College with Special Health Care Needs; Student Preparation for a Successful Transition. Available [here](#). Accessed May 6, 2013