



How to Help Your Teen Get Excited about College or a Vocation

Times of transition are frightening for anyone. Consider all the possible transitions involved in leaving high school and going to college: moving to a new city, breaking connections with many old friends, entering a large and formidable new setting, confusion about finding places, the rules of college life, and worries about money.

Likewise, the transition to work can be challenging for American teens. In Europe, apprenticeships help teens transition from full-time school to full-time employment. In the United States, the move from the fun and friendships of high school to the threats and challenges of the workplace can be very intimidating and lonely.

So how can parents help their teens make such transitions? The first step is compassion. Think about the times in your life when you were frightened or worried. Imagine what it may be like for your child. Let your feelings enlarge your understanding of and compassion for your teen.

Second, show your understanding by reflecting any concerns your teen shares. Naturally you do not want to plant fears. But if your teen expresses worries about any part of the new experience, do not merely dismiss it. Dismissing their worries can make teens even more lonely and worried. For example, instead of, "Don't worry about it. You'll be all right. A million other kids have been through this," it is more helpful to say, "You're worried about how you'll fit in? It is overwhelming to go to a new place and make new friends." Taking time to understand what someone feels sends a powerful message of comfort and caring. Understanding helps us feel less alone and less afraid.

Third, normalize the learning process. Research shows that it is helpful to tell teens, "It is normal to make mistakes. You probably will forget some assignments. You might mess up; that is normal. But you can learn from every mistake." When your child knows that mistakes are normal, he or she doesn't feel so stupid when a mistake is made or so dumb when he or she misunderstands an assignment.

Fourth, provide loving support. Write letters, visit, send e-mail, send cookies. Your child may not write back or acknowledge your support, but don't be discouraged. In ways that are helpful to your child, send the message that you are supportive. If your child talks of quitting, encourage him or her to give it a reasonable amount of time. Don't panic if your child insists on taking some time off. Help your child solve

any problems that arise. Invite your child to tell you about things he has learned or friends she has made. Make the message of your love very clear.

Fifth, help your teen find balance in his or her new life. When you visit or talk on the phone, ask, "Have you worked out a study schedule? Have you made time for fun? Do you find time for exercise? Are you eating well?" Don't overload your teen with questions, but be available to help solve problems. You may be able to help your teen stay sharp and balanced.

Since your teen is increasingly seeing himself or herself as an adult, you can help celebrate new adult roles. Let him or her tell you about best experiences, growth experiences, and aspirations. Support these. This is a time when the good things you do for your child will pay off. Every child has struggles, but your support will help your child move into adult life as a responsible, productive, and caring human being.