

Back to School Advice for Parents

Your kid is starting high school or—swallow hard—college. Experts share their advice on helping them crush (or at least survive) the frosh challenges. Here's the ultimate freshman orientation (for parents).

By **Louisa Kamps**

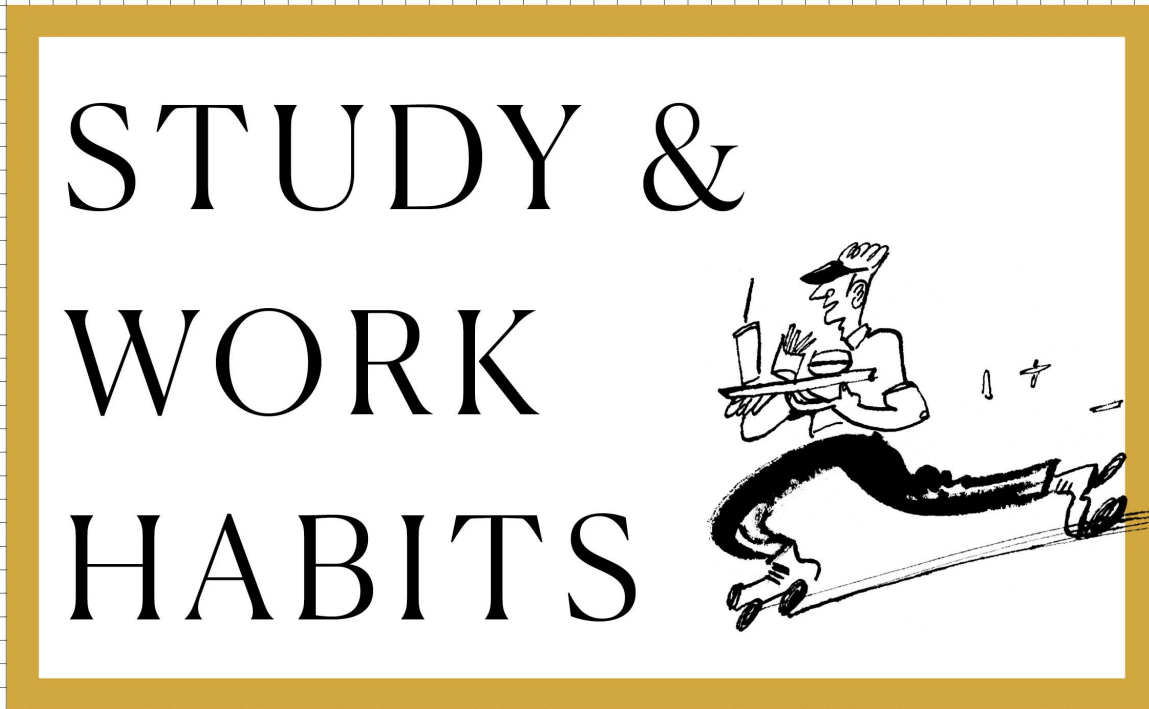


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High School: Pick an Organizer

It doesn't matter if your kid goes with an old-school calendar or an online app (myHomework is a fave). When frosh use a school planner from the start of the year, the payoff is huge. Josh Brant, a clinical psychologist and teacher at the Hopkins School in New Haven, CT, recommends that, early in the term, parents check in often to make sure kids are logging assignments properly. (A tip on tone: Imagine you're asking a neighbor's kid what's up with his homework—keep it curious but casual.) Soon you'll be able to dial back the nagging monitoring. Once kids see the benefits—less stress, better grades, more time to noodle on the ukulele—they'll be motivated to keep at it.

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Talk to Teachers (Your Kids, Not You)

Most kids this age should have enough confidence to speak to teachers on their own, says Phyllis Fagell, a school counselor and psychotherapist in Washington and author of *Middle School Matters: The 10 Key Skills Kids Need to Thrive in Middle School and Beyond—and How Parents Can Help*. But let's say your daughter hasn't nailed that skill and didn't do well on a quiz. You can coach her as she writes an email asking for help. Or if she tells you she'll speak to the teacher by Friday, tell her it's a plan, but if she doesn't follow up, "you might reach out yourself," Fagell says. It's a subtle way to nudge, because most kids don't want their parents (no offense—also, hooray!) speaking to their teachers.

College

Make the Most of Office Hours Many undergrads assume professors' office hours are just for grad school wonks. But profs are required to hold office hours—really and truly—to talk with any student willing to knock on their door. Students who make that effort often cite it as the smartest move of their college career. "New students should always go see their professors," says Alison Leigh Cowan, editor of *How to Survive Your Freshman Year*. "Professors know about things"—internships, honors classes, career options—"that you've never even heard of before." That moon-shot inspiration is in addition to, you know, explaining that theory that wasn't totally clear in class.

Get a Job! (And Throw a Ball) You know the old saw: If you want something to get done, ask a busy person. Finding a part-time job helps freshmen make friends and manage time effectively, all while earning cash. Jeri Rochman, director at Advance LA, a program for young adults with learning differences and other challenges, has seen many freshmen who pick up part-time jobs quickly learn to safeguard their study time (she recommends 10 hours of work a week, max). Playing sports seems to have a similar effect: Freshmen who played rec sports at Michigan State not only had higher average grades than freshmen who didn't, they also were 40% more likely to return to school the following year, according to an MSU report.

High School: Talk About How High School Is Weird

Eighth-grade graduate to high school freshman is as “hero to zero” as it gets. There’s a vast developmental difference between 14-year-olds and 18-year-old seniors, says Nora Zimbler, a therapist in New York. Your son can boost his confidence by always walking into school with a friend. Your daughter can say hi to the older kids from your neighborhood without making a dweeby nuisance of herself. And they can choose to see their classmates’ rapid cycling through styles (goth today, Harajuku tomorrow) as reassurance that everyone is hustling to figure out this new game. “The main thing to do is normalize the fact that this is a lot to adjust to, and let them know you’re sure they’ll figure it out,” Zimbler says.

Take Time to Find Your People

Friendships can shift drastically during the first months of school, so Zimbler tells her freshman clients not to take it too personally if their old besties turn into acquaintances and they don’t immediately find new soul mates. “It’s OK to take a breath and a look around to find people they really connect with,” she explains.

College: Say Goodbye Before Move-In Day

Before you’ve crammed all those duffels into the Subaru and set off for your kid’s new U, express your heartfelt goodbyes and agree on how often you’ll check in with each other by text or phone. In other words, don’t save the big goodbye for your kid’s new dorm room. It’ll be easier to part without dragging things out, says Sharon Bond at the University of Denver: “From the moment you get on campus, you want your child to build new connections.”

Don’t Get Stuck in a Bubble

Although freshmen often flock toward other classmates who look and think like them, it can be healthy—and surprisingly fun—to resist that instinct. College is the place where students can expand the circle of people they know, like and can speak to easily. If they stumble on sensitive topics (race, religion and politics), they can avoid hurting feelings by following Cowan’s simple rule: Talk less, listen more. “Learning from everyone in college is priceless. You don’t have to stifle your own views. But it helps to first listen respectfully and process what others have to say.”

High School: Hail, Self-Care (Look Out for Big Mood Swings)

As teenagers experience rising rates of depression and anxiety, school counselors keep telling parents to remind their kids to—sing it with us, ladies—eat a healthy diet, exercise and sleep enough (8 to 10 hours is the RDA for teens). Kids who follow these basic rules of self-care tend to bounce back quickly from stresses, Zimbler says. If your kid suddenly loses interest in school and activities they used to enjoy—and it's not related to sleep or diet—take them to a doctor or therapist who can help figure out what's going on.

Own Your Hobbies

As pressure to get good grades ramps up, parents can stoke their kids' innate joy and resilience by calling out and praising things they love about their kids—their determination, ferocious wit, cool hand with a Frisbee—that have nothing to do with school. Whenever Fagell's 16-year-old daughter, who loves photography, shows off her new pictures, Fagell admires them (natch) and tells her. "I value her dedication as much as anything she accomplishes in school—and she should too."

College: Find the Mental Health Center

As the number of students seeking help for mental health issues has shot up, many schools have expanded resources to help students cope. Meditation and yoga classes and anxiety/depression support groups are now common on many campuses, alongside more counseling services. If you have a freshman, you should straight-up say that you expect them to treat any prolonged dip in mood the same as they would a sprained ankle—as a sign that it's time to go to the health center, Rochman says.

Mom: Get a Grip

Kids can vibe off their parents, so if you want them to feel psyched and ready, help them by getting your own jitters under control. If you're nervous about your kid leaving—and dealing on their own—remind yourself that this is the natural course of events. They went off to kindergarten. They went off to middle school. They handled high school. Yes, you did a lot of work along the way, but so did they, and now it's time to let them thrive on their own.

Bonus: Ditch Digital Distraction

The thought of your son Snapchatting through math class makes you want to put his phone in the blender. But don't. Instead, explain that people who multitask less (i.e., resist screen swiping) are more productive and get better grades. Then talk about how you stay off your phone when you've got work to do. Maybe your son will silence and stash his phone in another room, or use an app (such as Freedom or SelfControl) that blocks access to social media and other distractions.

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