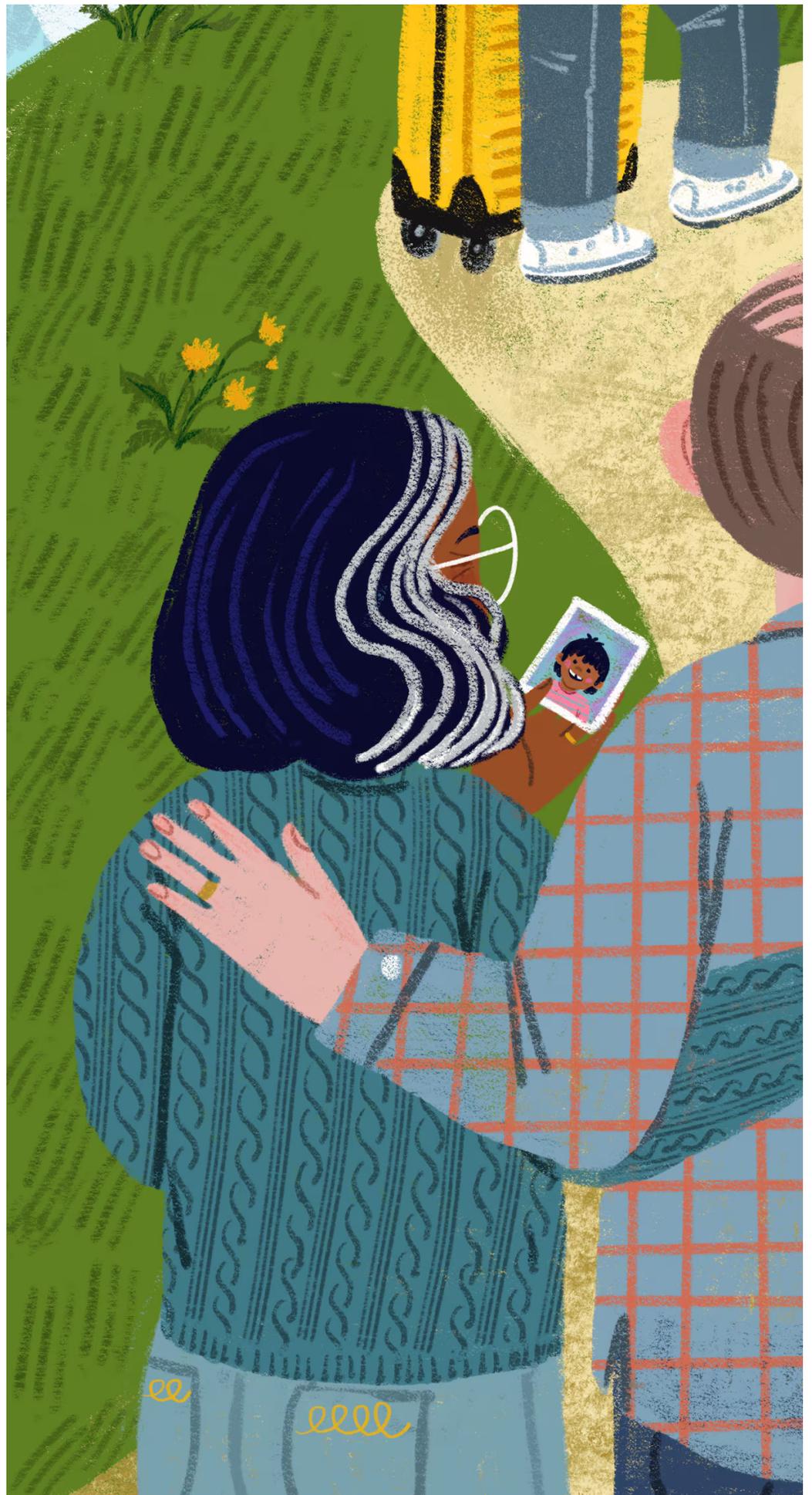




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In a few weeks, many parents will be sending their teens to college or university for the first time. It's a major milestone that often mixes excitement with anxiety.

At least, that was my experience when I proudly shipped my son off to university in another province: *He's launching into adulthood! These are going to be the best years of his life!* But then the maternal urge to keep him home forever under my watchful eye kicked in: *How will he know how to follow a budget, eat healthy meals, change his bedding?* It felt as if time was running out to teach him all of life's important skills.

The shift from high school to college or university can bring a similar wave of emotions for parents whose teens are staying in their hometown: the joy of new beginnings, but also sadness and worry over letting go.

Beyond the whirlwind of emotions are the practical

questions that pop up. Not just what new dorm or school supplies they might need but also – does my teen need a credit card? How will they make new friends? Will they eat enough greens?

While experts say part of the purpose of first year is for students to experiment and figure things out as they go, here are six tips for how parents can guide and support them through the transition – whether their kid is heading to a school far from home or staying in the nest (for now).

1. Ask your teen how they're feeling

It may sound obvious but asking your soon-to-be college or university student how they're feeling about heading to a new school is a good place to start.

Lynne McNally, a Toronto-based therapist who works with families during life transitions, says open-ended questions are best, such as: What are you most nervous or excited about?

“Think back to when you were at that stage: What would you have wanted to hear from your parent? It's as simple as asking, ‘What do you need and how can I help you?’” McNally said.

This might include establishing new routines for the relationship, such as how often to phone or text if they're going away to school. For kids remaining at home, McNally suggests revisiting house rules – such as curfew or the use of shared areas (for example, kitchen closes at 10 p.m.).

While it can be hard to find a time when your teen feels like talking, McNally says taking a drive or going for a walk with them can lead to candid conversations with big impact. Many students preparing for this new chapter feel anxious about the unknown, she says. Talking about it and letting them know you're there to support them goes a long way.

2. Keep your expectations in check

Parents and teens often have high expectations for first year but settling into campus life is all about trial and error.

Harlan Cohen is a New York Times bestselling author and speaker who leads coaching programs for parents and students, including a popular college transition planning series called "Best First Year." Cohen calls this year "the getting comfortable year" because it leaves room for experimenting.

"When something's an experiment, the expectations are shifted because it's not about outcome but rather about experiencing something and processing it. That's a victory," he said. "Parents need to recognize that this year is really about working through change."

To that end, parents should understand that making friends and transitioning socially, for instance, take time and patience. As Cohen put it, "Your job is to direct your students to the people and places where they can get the help they need. Be patient and trust it'll be okay. Your child will sense that."



3. Encourage the use of student services

Postsecondary institutions have come a long way since today's parents were students.

When we visited universities with our son, I was surprised to see how many now have dedicated health and wellness centres, which include everything from on-site nurses to virtual counselling sessions.

Most schools also offer writing centres, study skills programs and career counselling. McNally suggests encouraging your teen to become familiar with the types of services available and to take advantage of them early so that they're not left scrambling once any issues arise.

4. Discuss ways to build community

A common source of anxiety for both parents and teens is how to make friends in a new setting. "The

highest priority, in terms of needs, is finding community. There's a lot of anxiety and fear that I'm not going to find my people," explained Cohen. Parents can remind their child to look for people with common interests in settings such as clubs, spiritual groups or volunteer organizations.

McInally agrees extracurricular activities are a great way to make friends with like-minded people. She's observed that many people give up the activities they enjoyed in high school, such as basketball or ice skating, once they get to postsecondary. Parents can encourage students to explore their new school's teams or clubs in advance so they'll be more likely to join and meet people, which can also boost physical and mental health.

5. Set a budget together – and plan to revisit it

Shannon Lee Simmons, a certified financial planner in Toronto and founder of New School of Finance, an advice-only financial planning firm, says that breaking the school year into categories – fall semester, winter semester and summer – and figuring out the expenses that come with each is a great first step. It's also important to distinguish between one-offs, such as tuition or textbooks, and day-to-day expenses. Simmons advises parents to regroup with their student every four months to ensure you're on track and to make any necessary adjustments.

Clarity is a must. In many instances, teens don't know their exact budget because parents used vague language, for example, telling them, "Don't worry,

we'll help you," without providing details. Regardless of whether you plan to support your student financially, sit with them and map out different revenue streams – government grants and loans, RESP, savings, income from a part-time job, possible parental support – and help them understand what to do with each one.

Simmons also suggests parents equip children 17 and under with a bank account and a digital wallet. For those 18 and older, a low-balance credit card with a first-time limit of around \$500 is the way to go. "We, especially young people, live our lives entirely online and digitally now. They need to be able to practise budgeting and screwing up," she said, adding that it's also a great way to start building a credit score.

6. Have your teen practise meal planning

Most first-year students living in residence will have to sign up for a meal plan, but that doesn't mean they'll always want to eat what's on offer. My son had a meal plan with food he deemed inedible; that meant the addition of a mini-fridge to his dorm room, a kettle and frequent trips to the grocery store.

Students living off-campus will suddenly be responsible for cooking their own meals, while those living at home will be navigating a whole new schedule that often includes missing family meals or fuelling up for late-night study sessions. It can feel daunting.

Kinga Balogh, a registered dietitian at JM Nutrition in

Toronto, suggests outlining five or six basic meals that a young adult could learn to make, such as overnight oats, grain bowls, stir-fries or vegetarian chili. Snacks are vital, too, especially for those living in dorms and wanting to complement what they're getting in the dining hall. Solid options include canned tuna with whole-grain crackers, yogurt with frozen berries and high-fibre granola, and hummus with precut veggie sticks.

It's a good idea to involve your teen in meal planning, grocery shopping, prep and serving prior to heading off. As Balogh explains, "This is a life skill. There's budgeting involved, time management and prioritization skills. It's a valuable learning opportunity."

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