

Life After High School: How is a parent to know if a teen is ready for college?

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by Linda Lee

This time of year parents, teachers, school advisors, and school officials focus on one subject: getting students into the best colleges. They grapple with decisions about whether teenagers should apply for early decision (so they don't have to wait until spring to hear from their first choice) and which schools are a good fit: those close to home versus far away, big or small, an academic reach or a comfortable match. Only rarely do adults stop to ask whether the child should be going to college at all, at least for now.

Some teenagers are emotionally and academically prepared for the challenges of college. But others may be bored with school. Of this group, there are wonderful students who are eager to get out in the world and be on their own. They may benefit from taking what is called a "gap year" in England. Some would in fact do better at a trade school. And others might be ready to go to work now for a start-up computer company and go to college later, when they can pay for it themselves.

The following set of questions may help you figure out whether your teenager has the drive and discipline to succeed at college, because success at college involves more than intelligence. A smart child will fail at college if he or she skips class, stays out partying all night, and gives up on tough assignments. You might also review the checklist if your daughter herself says she's worried that she won't be able to handle the work and the freedom.

Choose the statements that describe your child (below), and then take a look at what some experts have to say about those questions by clicking on the link following the statement.

1. If asked to do a household task, the teenager will invariably say, "Why should I?"
([see expert opinion](#))

2. The teenager finishes things he or she starts, whether it is a school assignment, a household chore, or a hobby.
([see expert opinion](#))

3. Your child has defaced, gouged, torn, or otherwise tortured an assigned textbook or library book.
([see expert opinion](#))

4. Your child has often forgotten to bring home forms for you to sign for events like trips,

appointments, or special events at school.

(see expert opinion)

5. Your son or daughter has developed a technique for studying for a test, like reviewing material, making flash cards, writing outlines, or rereading chapter summaries.

(see expert opinion)

6. Your son or daughter is analytical about what he or she did wrong; he knows which questions he got wrong before he gets the test back; she takes blame for her mistakes.

(see expert opinion)

7. When assigned to a research paper, your child starts by going to the library or searching the Internet long before the paper is due.

(see expert opinion)

8. If given a choice between watching a favorite TV program and getting an important paper finished, your child would opt to watch television first.

(see expert opinion)

9. Your child has expressed ambition to be the best in the field, whether it is music, sports, flower arranging, academics, modeling, whatever.

(see expert opinion)

10. Your teenager may not be good in everything he or she does. But in his or her area of interest, he or she will work through the night on something. (Note: Talking on the phone and playing computer games don't count; repairing the computer does.)

(see expert opinion)

By considering the scenarios in the checklist and the experts' responses, you'll find a starting point for discussing concerns with your teenager. The earlier conversations are initiated, the more time there is to make any necessary changes to ensure your son or daughter is prepared for life after high school. Whether he or she opts to head off to college right away, take a year off, or explore alternatives, the key is two-way communication.

For parents whose children are younger, initiate conversations about the many types of jobs adults have, and include those that do and do not require a college degree. Ask your children what they want to be when they grow up, and be prepared for the answer to change often. Help your children learn about those jobs that sound interesting. By the time high school approaches, you will have helped them understand what it takes to pursue their dreams.

Linda Lee is an editor and writer for the *New York Times*. She frequently contributes to the *Style*, *Arts and Leisure*, and *Business* sections. This article has been excerpted from her book *Success Without College*, Doubleday, 2000. The book includes 10 additional questions, a scoring system for the quiz, more detailed responses, and profiles of students and parents from around the country who have found creative, positive solutions to their college dilemma. Visit www.successwithoutcollege.com to write to Lee, to order the book, and to link to a number of other sites that she has found helpful.



What Some Experts Say:

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1. I'll take the first one. Your son or daughter is not being cooperative on the little things, and college is a big thing. It is a collaborative endeavor: You put up the money; he or she puts in the effort.

2. Tom Hassan, dean of admissions at Phillips Exeter Academy, a prep school:
"....Procrastination seems to be an inevitable part of adolescence. Teenagers, though, who stick with the task, even if that comes close to a deadline, impress admissions officers...." How do college admissions evaluators identify those students who finish what they set out to do? "Careful readers of admissions files pay particular attention to the language used by recommenders. They like to read about students who come to class stimulated by what they have read, students who are able to talk about it in class. They also like to see students who have pursued a hobby with a passion and persistence."

3. Sure it's easy to write in the textbook, to circle the questions to be answered or underline the parts that will be on the test. And what's the difference if a book is thrown into a corner at the end of a school day, or used for first base in a pick-up game of softball? There's a big difference.

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Life after high school graduation could mean enrolling in college, taking a year off to travel, getting a full-time job, enlisting in the military, attending trade school, or a host of other options. The key is helping teens decide what's right for them.

4. Carole S. Fungaroli, Ph.D., professor of English at Georgetown University: "Forgetting documents, even those for fun activities, means your child is mentally elsewhere. Picture a telephone that is off the hook or a computer line that has dropped the connection. Your child is so unattached to school that he or she has no idea what those pieces of paper mean, or why they should matter."

5. Gail Reardon, an independent counselor in Newton Massachusetts, who helps students structure time off: "While they will probably do very well in college, this kind of child would also

benefit from a year that allows [him or her] to explore other parts of themselves and other perspectives. Sometimes all that's missing is a different tempo of life, and kids can get that almost anywhere outside the United States."



6. Bob Schleser, professor of psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology: "There are two components here. One is the recognition of their error; the other is accepting responsibility. A good student will say, 'It wasn't a lack of ability; it was a lack of effort on my part.'"

7. Al Newell, dean of enrollment, Washington Jefferson College, Washington, Massachusetts: "If your child is exhibiting this kind of a behavior, as a parent you should count your blessings. One of the factors that distinguished those students who excel in college, as opposed to merely surviving, is the ability to manage time."

8. Note the words "important paper." Geoffrey Gould, director of admissions at Binghamton University, believes that parents should leave it to the child: "When children learn to make decisions that work for them, confidence is instilled. Parental support is essential as children learn to weigh alternatives and understand the benefits and consequences of choices....A brief stint of relaxing television followed by getting down to work makes sense, as the rewarded, refreshed student should then be content to study. On the other hand, the reward of television after study can work for some, but that won't work for all."

Going to an Ivy League school doesn't automatically guarantee a better job and higher pay. Some high school graduates who opt not to attend college earn good livings as computer programmers, plumbers, masons, etc.

9. Norm Fraley, manager of distance learning for Kelly Scientific, a temporary employment agency: "Ambition to be the best, even if it is only for a few minutes, reveals the existence of seeds of greatness. Any desire to be the best at anything is great leaps beyond having no focus at all; it is a decision to do something. Ambition cannot exist without a goal or at least a vision. However, execution of the desire is another matter. Part of the way into the activity, your child may find that he or she does not want to be the best or even continue to do it at all. This is also a good thing. As parents we should encourage the practical decision of cutting losses and refocusing efforts on those things that are more important. This helps build a healthy self-esteem by empowering the child to act upon [his] decisions."

10. David Rynick, executive director of Dynamy, an internship program in Worcester, Massachusetts: "We often praise young people who can do everything well. But students who have a passion for an area of life or study will often outperform the well-rounded student in the

long run....One word of caution: If your child's area of interest is narrow, make sure [he or she is] headed for a school that will allow [the child] to spend a lot of time in that area."