

## How Can I Tell If My Senior Is Ready for College...and for Life?

by Jen Dodrill

When I graduated high school, I knew I would attend college. That was what my parents expected. I didn't feel the pressure I think many students feel today – that at the tender age of 18, I had to know what I wanted to do for the next 40 years.

Today children graduating from homeschool tend to settle on one of these three choices: trade school, gap year, college. I'll call it a "gap year" even if the student insists that he or she wants to go straight into a job after homeschool, because that job experience itself might prompt a desire for further education. You never know!

In any case, it's vital that the student be ready for what comes next.

### *How Do You Know If They're Ready to Fly?*

We have five children. Our baby graduates May 2020 and is following her siblings' footsteps by going to college.

Not all of our kiddos went away to university right away. After our first child went to college, it was actually the rest of our family that moved. My husband, active duty Navy at the time, had orders to the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. Our daughter decided to stay behind and continue to attend her university. It was up to her to sink or swim.

Two years later we retired and moved back, and our oldest son started classes at the community college. He lived at home for the next year and a half before he transferred to the university in town, where he earned a degree in accounting

Kiddo #3 followed his brother's footsteps and took community college classes before he transferred to a university several hours away. After a total of four years of college, he decided to get a job. He told me, "Mom, I will have to switch colleges to get the major I really want, and that means more debt. So instead, I'm going to look for a job." It turned out that he was right, and the degree wasn't needed. He is currently working for an established website writing code.

Our middle daughter, child #4, took dual-enrollment courses during her junior and senior year of high school and went straight to college when she graduated. She was able to finish in three years with a degree in psychology.

And, like I said, my baby will leave in August for a college about four hours from home. She is planning to major in criminal justice and wants to work for the DEA.

### *But Are They Really Prepared?*

Do I feel they were all prepared for college? Well, it depends on the child. Our oldest was pushed out of the nest abruptly, but she had the maturity and practical skills needed to be able to persist on her own and to graduate with a degree in elementary education.

Our boys, in particular, needed the time at community college. Although they were academically ready to attend college away from home, staying home gave them more time to grow up. And even though one of our kids did not graduate college, he feels that taking various courses in college helped him to nail down what he really wanted to do.

Attending community college offers students the chance to step into college life while not having the responsibilities involved with moving away from home. Students can take an orientation class, or a study-skills course, as well as learn how to reach out for academic help while still living with their family. They can also use that time to take some courses in different majors to explore other areas.

I truly believe our middle daughter would have benefitted from attending community college after high school. Although she took dual-enrollment classes in high school, and she had an easy time at college academically, her emotional maturity took about two years to catch up. In hindsight, staying home an extra year or two would have been good for her.

### *Academic Readiness*

Here are a few things you can look for to determine your child's academic readiness:

- Their interest in visiting college or looking at trade schools
- How they score on standardized tests
- Grades in dual enrollment or AP classes
- Their willingness to contact teachers for references, apply to colleges, keep up with their own grades, and apply for scholarships

What if you don't believe in standardized testing and your student hasn't taken AP courses or dual-enrollment courses? In those cases, the best way to determine academic readiness is to keep an eye on their fluency levels in math and reading. According to a US News & World Report article, "High School Seniors Aren't College-Ready," in 2016, only 37% of kids going into college were prepared for college-level math and reading. The key academic areas, particularly writing and math, carry over into college and can set them up for success or struggles.

You can always buy an Accuplacer study guide (\$15 to \$25 on Amazon) and have your student do a timed placement test at home. This is the test most community colleges use to place students in their first math and English class, so if you're going the community-college route, as a bonus this exercise can help them see what gaps they need to fill in to skip an introductory course!

### *Emotional & Spiritual Readiness*

We hear a lot these days about the huge proportion of college students struggling with mental-health issues. A World Health Organization study reported in 2018 that worldwide, about 35 percent of first-year college students struggle with mental illness, with depression and chronic anxiety leading the list.

To check if your students are emotionally ready for college, you can ask yourself these questions:

- How do they handle being disappointed or dealing with anxiety?
- Are they able to disagree with people, and have people disagree with them, without making it personal?

- Are they prepared to handle romantic relationships?
- Do they recognize the signs of a manipulative or abusive person, and do they understand how to avoid or escape that kind of relationship?
- Do they know how to find support at college beyond academics—particularly if they are being bullied or pressured?
- Are they aware of their options if they feel overwhelmed: asking for a deadline extension, requesting tutoring assistance, dropping a course, changing a major, taking a semester or year off, dropping outside work hours, or just calling home and talking about why they feel overwhelmed?

I'm sure you want to make sure your children are spiritually prepared for whatever they do in life. College may challenge their belief system, peer pressure may come in different forms, and we all want our kids to be able to know their worldview and be able to defend it. Keeping those lines of communication open with your students will help tremendously. We can teach them how to handle these things rationally and help them to stand strong.

### *What More Can You Do to Help Them Get Ready?*

I've always believed that my job as a parent is not to save my child from every single possible hurt, but to protect them in their young years and, as they grow older, to help them learn to deal with life in creative and healthy ways. I truly believe that letting our children experience failure is actually good for them. Why? Because I've seen it play out so many times in our own family and in my job.

As an adjunct instructor at a community college, I have seen kids taking dual-enrollment classes, as some of mine did. I've seen students go straight to community college when really all they wanted to do was get a job. Sometimes students transfer to our community college after being at a university.

Not being ready to leave home at 18 isn't a failure on your part or theirs. Just like parents, kids have a wide range of maturity and coping skills.

I know you want to help your child be ready to fly from the nest. Here are some beneficial life skills for them to learn:

- Washing and drying clothes
- Reading directions
- Writing an email to a teacher or instructor
- Making a phone call
- Changing a tire/oil in the car
- Making healthy food choices
- Setting up a budget for school and supplies
- How to shop for and cook basic foods
- How to open a bank account or get a debit card
- What to do when they get sick
- How to talk to a professor
- Organizational skills
- How to take notes by hand
- How to pay bills
- What to do if they get stopped by the police
- How to deal with people from other cultures
- How to have healthy friendships
- How to apologize
- Morals—how to treat others
- How to seek help when needed

If you have determined that your senior is on track and ready to fly, let them! They may get a little bruised, and they may even come home for a short time. Trust me, there are worse things.

If your senior is definitely not ready, you might explore some other options. Encourage a gap year or trade school or getting a job. A gap year isn't just a time to stay

home and play video games; it's a great time to work, job shadow, take CLEP tests, or do volunteer work. Sometimes our kids just need a little extra time. And that is not a bad thing!

### ***What About You?***

The one thing I don't have advice for is how to handle your own emotions when your baby leaves the nest. It is a wonderful time for you to do something new for yourself—take a class, find a new hobby, or even start a business. Personally, I'm going to stock up on Kleenex and chocolate (and maybe take a short vacation)!

*Jen Dodrill has been married 34 years, is a proud mom to 5 kids, and she homeschooled the youngest three. The “baby” graduates in May, but Jen refuses to bow to empty-nest syndrome! She teaches Oral Communication as an adjunct instructor and writes curriculum under @History-At-Home at TeachersPayTeachers. When she's not working, she's spending time with her kids and adorable granddaughters. Connect with her on her blog, JenDodrillHistoryAtHome.com, on Instagram at @JenDodrill, on Facebook at @jennifer.r.dodrill, and her favorite place – Pinterest – at @JenDodrillHistoryatHome.*