



Laura Kastner, PhD

**The Launching Years: Parenting Teens
for Senior Year and Beyond**

Speaker Handout for Menlo School Workshop: Feb. 5, 2011

Laura Kastner, PhD, is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington and a nationally renowned expert on teen behavior and development. She writes and lectures widely on adolescence and family relationships. With Jennifer Wyatt, she co-wrote *Getting to Calm: Cool-Headed Strategies for Parenting Tweens and Teens*, *The Seven Year Stretch: How Families Work Together to Grow Through Adolescence*, and *The Launching Years: Strategies for Parenting from Senior Year to College*.

Qualities of competent adult functioning include: becoming employable; a good citizen; a critical thinker; emotionally self reflective; personally trustworthy; possessed of common sense and meaningful ideals; and capable of mutually fulfilling relationships with others.

The Big Ten: Critical assets for optimal adolescent development and the successful transition to college and emerging adulthood (*The Launching Years*, Kastner & Wyatt, 2002).

1. Motivation and drive
2. Practical reasoning and judgment
3. Moral attentiveness and character
4. Emotional awareness
5. Healthy habits related to health, risk-taking, and fitness
6. Self-control and emotional regulation
7. Social skills
8. Communication skills
9. Intellectual interests and abilities
10. A sense of purpose and meaning in one's life

Qualifiers! (regarding our efforts to continue enhancing the Big Ten)

1. Maturation takes time, and most teens will have varying levels of these assets.
2. Teens are very messy on their way through maturation to competence (but well-managed messes make for excellent opportunities for competence-building!)
3. Risk-taking hits its peak between 18 and 25 years of age.

4. Teens possess individual differences and unique temperaments. The art of parenting is helping your children to become as competent as possible given who they are (and to avoid projecting your own personal dreams onto them and being “designer” parents).
5. While parenting shifts from a disciplinary role to more of a consultative one, your opinions do matter and your leveraging of supportive resources can matter even more.
6. The biggest errors in parenting come from “over” or “under” parenting (e.g. too much or too little control, protectiveness, helping, talking). *KNOW THYSELF* and make corrections.

Attending College

1. Parents should be prepared for this rite of passage to adulthood, which may include senioritis, power surges, senior slump, spoiling the nest, increased friction with parents and launch anxiety.
2. No research has ever documented that going to an elite college correlates with life success.
3. The students who make the most of their college educations are those who are very engaged with academics, extracurricular activities and college life.
4. Getting into college is one challenge, but staying in is another, which depends on the student’s Big Ten Assets, finances and family/personal circumstances (~1/3 don’t return after freshman year).
5. The best students are not always the best people. Keep perspective on the “numbers” game (SAT’s, IQ’s, GPA’s), and remember that they don’t measure goodness.
6. Research has found that the assuming of adult roles (career, marriage, childbearing and financial independence) occurs around 25 to 28 years of age. As compared to a generation ago, the skills required for success in marriages, careers and coping with contemporary society are more complex and involve more education, emotional intelligence, adaptability and social adeptness.
7. The more parents of launchers address their own developmental issues (satisfaction with work, love, avocations, friends, health), the more secure the launch pad for their launchers.
8. Gap years can be invaluable - but make sure they have a plan! (or plural)
9. Conceive of summers as personal development opportunities, involving employment, self-reliance, global citizenship, exposure to career paths, and experiences that you think will expand your child’s repertoire of life skills.
10. Get prepared for “home for the holidays” and the “not in my house” parameters, regarding house rules, family expectations and typical problems with substance use, nightlife and romantic partners.
11. Remember that YOU are their secure base. Friends are the ones they need to see desperately when they come home in order to re-affirm their ties, which relaxes gradually over the next few years as they develop bonds with others elsewhere.
12. Be prepared to see the child who left home as an Econ major dabbling in Marxist theory, if not bisexuality, because identity formation is an ongoing process through their early twenties.
13. Most freshmen adjust to college within the first couple of months, but engagement in college life is a critical variable in assuaging homesickness.

14. Many college freshmen threaten to transfer as a reflection of their ambivalent feelings in adjusting to their new college milieu (the serious ones pursue it).
15. Although letting go is important, so is staying connected. Mostly, college freshmen from supportive homes need to be left alone to solve their own problems, but occasionally they really do need a parent rescue operation (usually related to mental health issues).

Launching Tips

- Keep your send-off rituals small, simple and negotiated with your teen.
- Sprinkle your words of wisdom about college throughout the summer (instead of a bomb lecture.)
- As much as you'll look forward to their visits home, be ready for the whole package - they bring all those old habits with them.
- Don't forget to talk about the dangers of bingeing, sexual assault, hooking up, and an unstructured life.
- Emphasize the importance of seeking help when needed.
- Don't over-romanticize the college years as "the best years of your life" (how do you know?) They are usually a mixed bag, like all other phases.
- Agree ahead of time about your access to grades, phone contact and budgeting.
- Be ready for the "dump" phone call and realize that you are hearing about only a portion of their actual experience.
- Don't overemphasize "missing" and "losing" your children - rather, talk of your gladness for their next adventure, faith in their competence and joy in their successes.
- Prepare for your empty nesting (re: work, spousal relationship, friendships, health maintenance, new hobbies, travel).
- Don't project your own feelings onto siblings - often they thrive with the roomier nest!
- Don't worry so much about "parenting being over" - fortunately and unfortunately, it isn't!