



Laura Kastner, PhD

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

Attendee Notes 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: CoolHeaded 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*.

On the big picture: Stay focused on the optimal long-term personal development of your child: his/her social, emotional, moral and identity development. Social and emotional competence is more predictive of life success and achievement than grades, college attended, or other measures that our culture elevates.

On launch anxiety: Launch anxiety is contagious from child to parent, parent to child, and child to child. When our anxiety increases, we all experience cognitive narrowing, such that we stop considering the larger, abstract issues and focus on specific, more concrete issues. That is why students will focus on the food or the weather or the dorms or the cute tour guide at a prospective college rather than the abstract issues of what they might want to study or whether or not the college is a good fit for their interests and personality. Similarly, in their own anxiety, parents will focus on their students getting into a particular, "ideal" college rather than the more abstract concern of how to make sure their students are prepared socially and emotionally for any college. Students' brains are full of MANY worries about going to college: *Will I make new friends? Will I figure out who I want to become? Will I be able to make it in this competitive environment and world? Will I gain weight? Will I have "terminal virginity"?* A recent *New York Times* article describes how the emotional health of college freshman continues to decrease, with more and more students experiencing debilitating stress and needing mental health services. It's important to ask our students, "What are you worried about?" and to help them have a realistic view. Beware of the potential feedback loop in which worrying results in cognitive rehearsal, cognitive narrowing, and circular anxiety, increasing the possibility that what they are worried about will come true.

On choosing colleges to apply to: It's important that parents help gather and sort information so that students' decisions are not based on superficialities. Avoid making

the next step the “end-all”; there is no “ideal” school. Help your student find the best matches for their interests, personality, and financial resources. Be sure to “de-brand” schools so that students consider choices beyond the 20 most elite colleges, and factor into the final choice the burden of having to spend years paying off college debt. The percentage of students who look at their college choice and resultant debt with regret is going up every year. Large debt may limit their future choices of career or graduate study.

On expected, normal hot-button issues: Senioritis, power surges, and even more risk taking is normal for seniors. Seniors, like gorillas, will trash the nest before leaving to make it easier to leave. Our students’ brains will not be fully mature until their mid-twenties, but most of their risk-taking behavior will happen now, and parents should expect lots of differentiating friction as they get ready to leave.

On topics to discuss before your student leaves home: Parents MUST have the sexuality talk, especially about hookups under the influence of alcohol. Kastner stressed this as the one most important conversation needed, in addition to talking about binge drinking and designated drivers. Be sure to space out these talks over March through August instead of blasting them with one long lecture. Results are best if parents say “This talk is for me. I need to know I’ve talked to you about this. Please just tolerate it.” rather than saying “This is what you need to know.”

On what to do with summers: Summers are the opportunity to build character in different ways than during the school year. Often the summer after senior year is the best time to get a real, gritty first job, such as a roofer or barista; your student will likely learn more about the real world than he/she might learn by a service trip to Costa Rica with mostly privileged students. Start with the good news – the student gets two weeks to sleep until 2pm – but then after that expect them to work. Negotiate WHAT their job will be, not WHETHER they will have one.

On keeping the home foundation solid and healthy separation: College students are comforted to know that their parents are happy with their own lives and are not feeling abandoned by their children. Senior year is a good time for parents to invest in their own friendships and interests and find fulfillment as individuals. Stay connected with your student when they leave, but separate enough so they can fully engage where they are. You want them to jump into their college life with both feet and create their own satisfying future.

On helping students be ready for the real world: Drudgery is the key. It is very important for parents to insist on chores and family dinners, even when time seems to be the biggest commodity. Life is full of boring but important tasks. Parents should expect teens to be able to give 10 minutes to loading the dishwasher. If parents let students skip chores to study, then parents reinforce the idea that it’s all about them, and that getting good grades is THE most important thing. Expecting students to do chores may actually assist in keeping life normal and reduce student anxiety.

On romantic relationships: You can’t control love. When in doubt, say nothing and stay neutral. If parents express their opinions too strongly, students may shut parents out (think of Romeo and Juliet) and lose their opportunity to be a wise consultant.