

Empty Nest 101: a parents' survival guide

Before They Go



From handling disappointment and options if your young adult doesn't get the grades or university place they were hoping for, to transitioning from the small pond of school to the larger pond of higher education. We speak to *Dr Dominique Thompson*, of [Buzz Consulting](#), who is a multi-award winning GP, mental health expert, TEDx speaker, author, and educator for her thoughts.

How do we 'park the helicopter' and become consultants rather than managers? It's not easy to allow our kids some independence and autonomy to make their own decisions (and mistakes) - but it's all part of growing up. *Victoria Bagnall*, co-founder of [Connections in Mind](#), offers some great tips.

There are some really critical conversations you should have with your teen before you drop them off at college:

- The three S's: **sextortion** (with audio from *Roxy Longworth*, 19 year old author of '[When You Lose It](#)', drink **spiking** (with audio from *Suzanne Baum*, journalist) and **sexual consent** (we're going to assume you've had 'the talk' about sex well before they get accepted to college!)
- **Communications** expectations between parent and child - being realistic
- The three M's: **mental health**, **medical power of attorney** and **meningitis** (we talk to *Michelle Bresnahan* from [A Life for a Cure/Meningitis Now](#))

Didn't get the grades expected? Life pivot needed on university choice?

- Prep ahead: have a plan B (just in case). Is it location, size or subject that is driving the choice?
- First - don't panic! Take a breath and be supportive then....
- Second - take a moment to discuss what your child is really looking for
- Third - go to clearing houses in the UK, approach other colleges in the US, consider a gap year whilst you retake exams or gain world/working experience then try again

In the UK:

go to the UCAS site to explore 'clearing' to search for available university places.

Here's a link to super helpful blog from [UCAS](#)



In the United States:

check out the advice from *Genevieve Carlton*, phd through [BestColleges.com](#) in this [blog](#)



Communication

This is absolutely the key to sending them off successfully both for you and your teen. Discuss with them how often they wish to be contacted when they are away and when you can visit and remind them to contact their younger siblings - it's tough on them.

What is a fair expectation? Once a day (probably not), once a week on a certain day that works for you all? Occasional texts? Everyone is different - let's face it genders are different - but you need to agree in advance what is expected - but be reasonable. They'll have a lot going on in their lives so every day might not be possible.

If you need to get a message to them urgently that you know they'll see what platform should it be on? Text, WhatsApp, snapchat, email??

Sharing Grades

Striking a balance between being supportive if they need a bit of help (especially if they are neuro-diverse or get sick whilst they're there) and letting them have some autonomy.

Different colleges have different policies.

In the UK parents generally don't have access to them. In the USA, you might need to ask your student to let you have permission to see grades - or you might just trust in them to work hard, play hard to discover that life is a balance. Have the conversation before the argument though.



Finance/Allowance

Teens often have little idea of how to budget or manage money. Their costs will vary depending on where they are studying and whether living in self-catering or catered accommodation but one thing for sure is they almost overspend that first term! Decide if you intend to assist with finances or expect them to find a part-time job? Help them plan a weekly/monthly/termly budget so they get some idea of costs. Also, discuss vacation work and internships and how applying early helps secure the best roles.

[Save the Student](#). [USA Federal Student Aid](#)

[UCAS advice](#)

Security

Most students will be living in cities or towns they are unfamiliar with and so suggest that always go out in groups or set up a 'buddy system' where they look out for each other.

Cybersecurity: While you are having all those discussions about not walking alone at night you also need to talk about protecting their identity. It is not sensible to share passwords for social media accounts, mobile phones, laptops and student ID numbers. Additionally, banking information, credit cards, and money should always be kept secure.

Consider an app such as [Life360](#) (with your child's agreement!) so that you can sleep at night!

The three M's: mental health, meningitis, medical power of attorney



It's important to keep an eye out for symptoms of depression, the most common mental health challenge. Encourage regular check-ins with your student - by phone or video as well as texting. Keep lines of communication open. Talk about the challenges of being away from home, making new friends, keeping up with academics and stress that there is always someone they can talk to - either a college counsellor, a peer or family. Here's a great article from [McClean](#), an affiliate of Harvard Medical School

Many students come down with 'Freshers Flu' but there are more serious illnesses that they need to be aware of so do the research. Meningitis B is one such deadly illness. [Meningitis Now](#) offer 'wallet' sized downloads that you can print and give to your kids. Consider getting your kids immunised (privately unfortunately) for [Meningitis B - ACWY](#) that they get at school or pediatricians does NOT cover MenB



As a parent you have no access to their medical records as they are over 18 so putting a medical power of attorney in place in case of serious physical and mental illness is highly recommended. Here's some handy links - [UK NHS advice](#) [USA FreeWill advice](#)

The three S's: sextortion, sexual consent, spiking



Sextortion (and coercion)

is a type of cyber extortion. It involves the threat of having sexual information, images or clips shared. It is a discussion that we Gen X parents didn't have with our parents and therefore many of us are totally oblivious of what is going on in our teenager's and young adults' lives. But don't be naive and think your child is too smart to do something which is now so normalized. Discuss the dangers with them and make sure they know you will be there to support them if they become prey to sextortion.

'Sextortion' as a crime is a growing trend, treated with a national campaign by the FBI in the United States - and a conversation that really needs to be had between parent and child before starting secondary school or university. Kids are committing suicide after being targeted by organised crime gangs who pose as 'friends' through gaming apps and social media, gradually gaining trust before swiftly resorting to blackmail and extortion once explicit images are shared. The threats against kids make them think there is no where to turn to - and that more damage might happen to family, friends, school if they open up. Have the conversation - at least let them know they can turn to you for absolutely anything.

18,000 cases of sextortion reported in USA in 2021, likely many many more
60% of children in the UK have been asked for a sexual image or video of themselves (source: Lucy Faithfull Foundation)

TWC did a whole episode just on coercion, consent and consequences. Roxy & Gay Longworth wrote an incredible book on this topic called 'When You Lose It', covering their experience from different perspectives as mother and daughter.
Available on amazon [here](#) (TWC do not benefit from books sold via this link)

Sexual Consent

- it's can be another uncomfortable conversation but it needs to be had. From STD's and unwanted pregnancies to 'no meaning no'. If their partner is unable to say yes or never gives actual consent, then it is not acceptable to proceed. Both partners need to say yes to what is happening and being drunk is no excuse. Awkward as it is, maybe ask if they are clear on protection methods, should they choose to have sex.
Handy resource from [Rape Crisis here](#)



Spiking

- see separate TWC downloadable

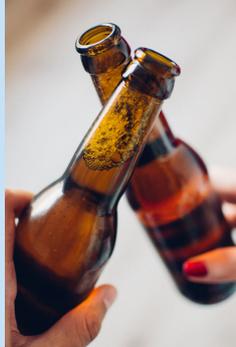
And one more.... handling **sexism**. Here's a great book you could share with your son or daughter '[How to Stand Up to Sexism](#)' by Toni Hargis

Drink Spiking



The effects of drink spiking vary depending on what you've been spiked with. Your symptoms could include:

- Lowered inhibitions
- Loss of balance
- Feeling sleepy
- Visual problems
- Confusion
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Unconsciousness



Drink spiking can happen in any situation, at home or on a night out. However, there are a few things you can do to protect yourself:

- Never leave your drink unattended, whether it's alcoholic or not
- Don't accept a drink from someone you don't know
- Avoid drinking too much by sticking to the UK low risk drinking guidelines
- Stick together with friends, and look out for each other

Advice from drinkaware.co.uk:

If you think a friend has had their drink spiked, and they are showing any of the symptoms described above there are a few things you can do to help:

- Tell a bar manager, bouncer or member of staff
- Stay with them and keep talking to them
- Call an ambulance if their condition deteriorates
- Don't let them go home on their own
- Don't let them leave with someone you don't know or trust
- Don't let them drink more alcohol - this could lead to more serious problems

One of the effects of date rape drugs can be amnesia, or loss of memory. That means it's possible that you won't be sure if you've been assaulted. But if you suspect you've been physically or sexually assaulted it's important to tell someone. Try to confide in someone you trust like a friend or family member.

You can go to the police or hospital accident & emergency department. If you don't feel able to do that right away, there are Rape Crisis charity helplines you can call for support and advice:

- England and Wales: 0808 802 9999 (12–2.30pm and 7-9.30pm every day)
- Scotland: 0808 801 0302 or text 07537 410 027 (6pm - midnight every day)
- Northern Ireland: 08000 246 991 (Monday and Thursday, 6 – 8pm)

If you, or someone you know, have been affected by crime, including sexual harassment or any sort of sexual harm, help and support is available. Victim Support is an independent charity for victims and witnesses of crime. They offer free, confidential help to anyone who's been affected by sexual harassment. Call 0808 16 89 111 or go to Victim Support's [website](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk).

Spiking someone's drink carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in the UK. One third of women have been spiked or know a friend who has been.