

Already Gone

A Parent's Guide to Surviving Senior Spring

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Already into college but not yet out of high school. That is the burden of more than a few twelfth graders struggling to reconcile the increasingly incongruous tasks of finishing childhood and starting adulthood – perhaps making senior spring feel to them like, well, the duration of childhood all over again.

“It’s this slow build to college,” laments eighteen-year-old “Sam.” “Mom’s crying, Dad’s yelling, emotions are high ... and high school looks pointless.”

Sam and many more like him have “checked out,” at least emotionally if not intellectually. And that makes staying in the game all that much harder.

While this season of discontent may ultimately – and perhaps paradoxically – smooth the transition to college, impending independence can present some challenging times for teens and parents alike. Barbara Green, a clinical psychologist at South Shore Hospital in Massachusetts, describes the goal of her work with families during this period as “keeping them from fraying at the seams.”

Not an easy task, especially given the theme of conflict that may permeate even the most solid parent-teen relationship given the stressors embedded in transition.

Conflict during senior year is rooted in a complex context of events (including SATs and college applications),

mental states (including stress, anxiety, and depression), and behaviors (including underage drinking and other drug use). By extension, trust is often eroded by a slowdown, or in some cases a shutdown, in open, honest communication, creating a cycle of turmoil that leaves many kids anxious to escape and many parents eager to help them.

Might there not be a better way to survive senior spring?

Absolutely.

A healthy transition for kids and parents requires a mutual understanding of, and – ideally – an appreciation for, the developmental dilemma on each side of the relationship, whether it’s a young person’s desire for more freedom or a parent’s difficulty in letting go. In Sam’s house, regular family meetings have diffused the tension “by letting everyone air what they’re thinking” and focusing on solutions.

And therein lies the key. Effective, results-oriented, parent-child communication around the myriad of issues that accompany senior year, perhaps especially in the spring, can go a long way toward resolving conflict, restoring trust, and rescuing relationships that, in Dr. Green’s words, may be frayed and close to coming apart at the seams. Those relationships will benefit, she says, from careful connection and elasticity.

How to get started?

First, by recognizing that in this time of change, old patterns of interaction, based on a soon-to-be extinct family structure, may no longer do the trick. Thus, conflict resolution begins best by acknowledging that it's time to rewrite the playbook by renegotiating longstanding roles of parent and child.

Indeed, successfully "launching" our kids requires that we acknowledge and support their autonomy and recognize their individuality.

It's a brave new world.

But that doesn't mean anything goes. Like all good negotiation, both parties must be open to listening to the other's point of view and to compromise. Of course, there will remain parental prerogatives that are non-negotiable, particularly those related to health, safety, and the law.

As senior year draws to a close, parents must contend with a series of events that are commonly associated with alcohol and other drug use: spring vacation, prom, and graduation.

A new National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign notes the dangers associated with the unstructured and often unsupervised time that accompanies school vacation week. It also cites recent studies that reveal traveling with friends is itself a risk factor for heavy drinking, as opposed to staying at home or going away with family.

Prom, too, is a time when even those teens inclined to walk the straight and narrow report pressure to drink, use drugs, or have sex.

And graduation doesn't get any easier.

Even for young people on the brink of independence, parents play a vital role in keeping them safe and alive during this particularly dangerous stretch of time. They can take some of these prudent steps.

- Initiate dialogue about decision-making.
- Embrace zero tolerance for alcohol and other drugs.
- Ensure supervision at parties.
- Ask teens to "check in" by phone when out.
- Enforce consequences for misbehavior.

Senior spring is, and should be, a time of reflection and anticipation – of looking back while preparing to move forward. Helping teens to celebrate the season safely will ultimately get them to where they are about to go.

Even though it may seem like they're already gone.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman of SADD and author of the new book Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling, has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, visit sadd.org. For more information about Stephen, visit stephengraywallace.com.