

PARENT UPDATE on

WHAT JUNIOR PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

Junior year presents a unique set of challenges and stressors for students and parents alike. On Feb. 10, [B-PEN](#) and the PTO presented [Dr. Deborah Offner](#), a clinical psychologist specializing in adolescent development and student mental health. She offered helpful parenting strategies for supporting students as they begin planning for life after high school, whether attending college, taking a gap year, the military, or going into the job market. BHS senior class Peer Leaders shared their perspectives on what students found helpful from their parents as they navigated junior year. And [a short video](#) featured BHS guidance counselors offering their reassuring insights into the junior year experience.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Student insights:

- The best thing parents can do is listen and support, taking cues from their teen about when and how to discuss post-high school plans.
- Many are scared to go off into the real world. They want to try different things and discover themselves rather than tailor experiences for acceptance to college.
- Good to know all post-graduation options. College is not for everyone, and a gap year can help build life skills. A successful future can come from many different paths.
- Surrounded at BHS with [resources](#) and helpful [guidance counselors](#).

Dr. Deborah Offner's key points ([slide deck](#) or [pdf](#).)

- Students have a lot more going on at this time than college as they start to curate an "authentic self," not the self parents want them to present to prospective colleges. Adolescence is a time of experimentation, identity formation. The job of parents is to move kids toward more independence, self-knowledge, and self-regulation.
- They all have their own unique developmental timelines. Some kids may need more support or different kinds of experiences.
- "Where you go is not who you'll be," (a good mantra and a recommended book by Frank Bruni.) There are benefits of not going to first choice universities but maybe smaller "ponds" where students can fit in, stand out, get more opportunities and attention, find a mentor, fall in love. (Most U.S. senators and Fortune 500 execs **did not** attend highly selective colleges like Ivy Leagues.) Also, transfers are common.
- College is not for everyone – some are not ready or have the maturity to leave home and would do better with the experience of working vs. classroom, maybe an apprenticeship, job training.

- Gap year is much more common and COVID spawned a lot more flexibility, so it's not as big a deal to be older. Be open-minded – not every student follows a linear path or a consecutive time table. Reinvention is part of emerging young adulthood.
- Have the financial conversation without putting pressure on grades/performance. For some young people, a college degree is not worth the debt if they don't get adequate aid. Keep in mind that community college in MA is free, and remember that there are a lot of ways to make a career.
- Talk to other parents as a source of support and a reality check.
- Mental health issues are on the rise, increased depression but less stigma, and kids more open to support. Affluence and privilege are little protection against student anxiety and depression. Kids feel bad for having advantages and still feeling depressed. GenZ is the most diverse generation the U.S. has seen, but tends to be more perfectionist, (curated images on social media, competitive culture) perceiving high demands and more demanding of selves and others. They can feel intimidated by parents they perceive as perfect.
- Pursue excellence without being perfectionist – recommends enjoying a variety of activities, thinking more of challenging endeavors and doing one's best.
- Friendships are key – quality not quantity – consider how loyal, kind friends are. Over time, relationships are more important than money or fame.
- For apathetic, unmotivated kids– ask if you can do anything to help. Pushing too hard can backfire. Consider outside guidance to motivate your student but preserve the parent/child relationship. She recommends “Bright Kids Who Couldn't Care Less,” by Ellen Braaten. It deals with fear of failure, not being engaged yet, rejecting parents' ideas of achievement.
- Parent the child you have, not the one you planned or expected. We all remember adolescence better than other times, so think what YOU were like when 16, 17. What were you up against? Generate empathy.

Talking Tips:

- Be there for your kids. Make yourself available when *they* want to talk, roll with impromptu chats and cancellations
- Also, you can identify designated times
- Listen, even if it's hard. Let them educate you. Be curious about their interests and perspectives
- Reflect back what you hear – validate feelings, draw on empathy.
- Can ask “Do you want to be helped, heard, or hugged?”
- Share relevant personal stories from own life, but don't overshare or burden
- Focus on their feelings not yours
- Try not to judge in the moment – you want to keep them talking
- Conversation – talk *with* not *at* them – let them finish before responding
- Model the behavior you want to see – they are watching
- Don't forget to BREATHE!

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www.facebook.com/BrooklineParentEducationNetwork

Tatianna_Lewis@psbma.org Karen_Campbell@psbma.org