

ADHD and Post-Secondary Education

By Dr. Joan Flood

They've made it (and so have you)! Your ADHD child has weathered the storms of grade school and high school and has that diploma in hand. Even without the added complications of learning disorders and other co-morbidities, any ADHD child who gets to shake his Principal's hand and receive that diploma deserves an extra round of applause.

And now for the next phase - post secondary education at college or university. He's been accepted and is on his way. The transition to the adult world of college and university is huge - for all students. Suddenly there is no structure - it is up to the student to get to class and to hand in the work. No one calls home if the student misses a deadline or doesn't show for an exam.

If your son/daughter will be living away from home, he will need to manage his day - when to get up (check online and buy them a "Clocky"), when to go to bed, taking his meds, getting to class. It is exciting to be in charge of oneself and not to have Mom/Dad overseeing your schedule. Your friends are your family - every student has heady dreams of the party life at school and looks forward to the new friends and experiences. They may not spend as much time dreaming about how they will ace their courses.

Moving on to college or university can be a giant step forward in your child's ability to self-manage and succeed. It can also be a time of failure and disappointment, depression and anxiety. What can you and your young adult child do to ensure the former and not the latter?

Preparation is key. First off, let's hope that she has chosen a path of study that she wants to pursue and is interested in. It is so much easier to work at something you enjoy - being involved in something one finds interesting mitigates against inattention. Getting past the general courses of high school and into an area of your own choosing is a great relief.

Is your child ready to go on to college? Are they mature enough? Would a gap year or some time to explore what life has to offer be worthwhile? Or would having your child leave the stream of academics make it insurmountable to return?

Has your child learned some good study skills? I always suggest tutors to help my ADHD students succeed in school. I am still waiting for the day when a child says “Hey, Dad, that’s a great idea - I’ll go see a tutor.” Instead, I hear “I don’t need a tutor” which in reality means “I don’t want to spend any more time banging my head against the wall trying to learn this stuff that I have no interest in.” But as a young person gets into the final laps of high school, they often begin to recognize the need for extra help and are more amenable to the idea. Having Mom or Dad be the tutor seldom works and I would strongly recommend against it (you don’t need the strain on your relationship for a starter) - besides, tutors are a tax deductible medical expense for anyone with ADHD or other learning disabilities. Once in university, tutors can be the determining factor between success and failure. If your child is already in the habit of asking for help, he will have his first step up the ladder.

School starts at 9am on September 7th so arrive at 8:45 and she’s set. If that’s the plan, then it’s NOT a good one. Once class starts, it moves at great speed and within a week, a student can be overwhelmed. So go back a few months - once that acceptance is in hand is the time to prepare.

Students with ADHD are recognized by post-secondary institutions as students with a disability and they are eligible for support and accommodations in a way that is seldom available in high school. Colleges and universities want your child to succeed and they make it a priority to help level the playing field for those with learning issues - they won’t change the curriculum for them, but they will do what they can to help them access the curriculum.

Many institutions have counsellors who will be assigned to a student to meet with them and advise them as to how to manage their course work. They can help them arrange tutoring - often from students in more senior years who are happy to teach and earn some extra funds. Your child can be assigned a note taker - a student who will share notes with your child (as long as they are attending class) to enable your child to focus more on what is being taught than what needs to be put on paper. At exam time, ADHD students can arrange a private room in which to write exams and receive extra time to do so (I hear they have great swivel chairs).

Hey - another thought - encourage them to take a reduced course load - their school will permit that if they have a disability - and remember, when you graduate you get the degree - not a paper that says

how long it took you to get it. So starting out with three or four courses is fine - better to be successful with a reduced year than flunk out on a full one.

There is great technology available - books can be scanned onto a memory stick and read to the student who struggles to read; voice recognition software can type their essays; special pens can record classes and reread notes back to students - there are new possibilities all the time. AND there are bursaries available at many institutions to assist a student who learning challenges - bursaries that will help fund their education or purchase assistive technology.

A student **MUST** (MUST- this is the key point) register with the Office of Disabilities/Assistive Learning before school starts. Usually a form needs to be completed by their physician that confirms their challenges. Often it is a requirement that a Psychological assessment be done within the three years prior to admission - sometimes the school will even help arrange this testing at reduced cost. Most schools will have an Orientation Day/Week for students offered accommodations - this is **NOT** to be missed. This is the time where a student can become comfortable with their campus, know where to go for help, meet their counsellors and learn about the accommodations. Once school is underway and the work is piling up is not the time to do these investigations.

I cannot overestimate how important it is to access the Disabilities opportunities in post-secondary school. I have tracked each and every one of my ADHD students who have pursued college/university. Those who have received guidance and know how to access help when they need it are the ones who succeed. Those who have not done so crash and burn - wasting a lot of money along the way - and frequently become depressed, which adds a whole other crisis to the situation. Your child will **NOT** be discriminated against because they have ADHD - it is an issue of human rights and well recognized by post-secondary institutions - even Harvard will welcome and assist a challenged student. Don't think that because they have moved on to this more adult of environments that they will figure it out on their own - insist that they get this help.

Your ADHD child is a complex package - yes they struggle with executive functions, but they often have great gifts of sociability, intelligence and original thinking that will serve them well in adult life. Help them onto that next step and support them along the way - they can manage post-secondary schooling with the right plan in place. They can succeed - but you still need to be in the background. Let's hope

that along the way, they take up the torch of advocating for themselves and their education, that they get what they want to be and where they want to go. Buy them a copy of “Learning Outside the Lines” by Mooney and Cole - a great book that describes the authors’ journeys through university - and keep in touch. You’ve got them this far - you and they can do the rest.