



Adoption &

My 15-year-old daughter from China attends a ferociously academic, heavily Asian, Midwestern public high school. Lily and her friends joke about the school's secret GPA weapon (Asian parents), but they accept advanced placement classes, symphony orchestra and extracurricular leadership opportunities as a matter of course. Lily's friends are being groomed for Big League universities; her friends' parents hail from China, Korea, India, Japan and Lebanon, and have firmly prepared their children for academic success on either of our coasts.

For Lily, high school has been an intriguing peek into what life would be like with a "real" Asian family. She's grateful for my low-pressure, Caucasian mom approach ("Have fun at school today, hon!"), but she also holds herself to the pervasive academic expectations of her teachers, and especially, of her Asian cohorts.

This works for me. I rarely need to harp at my daughter to do her homework, or practice the viola, or volunteer for National Honor Society — the stuff kids typically do in order to front-load a college admissions application. The academics and extras are just part of Lily's social

life, thanks to the high school's high-achieving Asian milieu. I can parentally coast, expecting that my kid's college prep grades and list of accomplishments will potentially channel her directly into a name brand university "Out East," or even more wow-ing — "Out West."

EXCEPT.

I would fail College Prep Parenting if I were to send this child off to school without cueing her into the true secret of her future collegiate success — and the secret has nothing to do with accomplishments or study habits. My parental coasting ends the minute we shine a light on adoption, and examine the effect my child's past has on her reactions to minor changes and major transitions.

Since preschool, beginnings, endings and separations have triggered overwhelming feelings of loss for my daughter. An adopted child has experienced loss and understands the terror of vulnerability; she knows that change isn't necessarily a positive event, and deeply fears that it could mean losing parents, friends and home. It has happened before.

A traumatic babyhood may have permanently

marked my daughter's response to change, but recognizing and acknowledging the reasons behind the triggers also equipped Lily with the tools to fight back. Openly talking about adoption loss and grief when Lily was young gave her the basis to create coping mechanisms to counteract the effects of change, separation and new situations. Together, we created middle steps that allowed Lily to ease into new activities and adventures. These three steps are easily personalized for use with families planning for college:

Middle Step: TALK. Parents can help an adopted child understand that previous losses (and fear of loss) may trigger over-fearful or anxious present-day responses to new situations. Our adopted kids need to know the root cause of what they are dealing with — what is the real issue in an emotional reaction; what is really driving the behavior? Discussing impending, post-high school life-changes may provide a parent and child an opportunity to talk about the lingering impact that old adoption reactions may have on future emotions, relationships and academic performance. Attending a small college or living at home while attending a local university might be appropriate middle step choices for some

College Prep Parenting

Beyond the ACT, SAT and Financial Aid...

By Jean MacLeod

first-year students, and open discussion can validate all options.

Middle Step: PRACTICE. Make a trip (or two) to the college before and after acceptance, and practice “life on a new planet.” Discuss best and worst case scenarios; for instance, how would your teen handle homesickness, a bad romance, getting lost on- or off-campus, or an incompatible roommate? Does your teen know how to seek out the types of groups, clubs or friendships that can provide an emotional safety net? It’s tough to be the new kid on campus, and our children need to know that loneliness is a normal, temporary piece of the adjustment — but they also need to know that they have control over their solutions — practice makes permanent.

Middle Step: SUPPORT. A savvy college parent is a sounding board (resisting the urge for “helpful” interference), and can provide an empathic ear to a college student taking steps toward autonomy. Are you set up with the social networking tools that will allow your child to connect with you instantly, and on a regular basis? Your college student is not going to call you nearly as often as he or she might text or chat you — and Gmail is free. Frequently Facebooking your teen is considered a Facebook faux pas, but if your college student allows you to be a “friend,” Facebook can provide a parent with an additional glimpse into a teen’s college adjustment and overall happiness. Ask yourself what you need to do to make regular parent-child contact easy.

Lily parlayed the talk, practice and support middle step coping tools throughout elementary, middle and high school, and is rarely ambushed in the comfort zones she has created at home, with friends and at school. However, going to college hundreds or thousands of miles away from home means an 18-year-old

is suddenly without familiar comfort zones — and without dependable, daily family support. Heaping change on an unsuspecting college freshman can make for a bumpy first semester. Heaping change on an unsuspecting freshman-adoptee can propel a student into a tailspin, or even back to the safety zone of home.

The transitional rituals built into the senior year of high school are in place for a reason. Team banquets, class trips, scholarship ceremonies, honors convocation, graduation and graduation parties are formal middle steps that help both kids and parents process the looming life changes in a socially supportive, systemic manner. However, adoptees may need an extra layer of preparation in order to counter the cultural “growing up and leaving home for good” mentality built around going off to college.

Emotionally preparing our adopted children to make a positive move to school is just as important as mentally prepping for the ACT or SAT. We need to help our soon-to-be college kids create their own middle steps when necessary. We need to teach them how to create new support systems and healthy ways to reach out and connect, both to others and to us. We especially need to let our kids know that we acknowledge their extra challenges with separation — that we have faith in their coping abilities, and that we will continue to be truly available whenever, or wherever, they need us.

Jean MacLeod is the author of “At Home in This World,” the contributing co-editor of “Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections,” and the creator of a parent resource site at www.AdoptionToolbox.com. She is the mother of a college junior, a high school sophomore and a sixth-grader who thinks university life means all-you-can-watch TV.
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THE STANFORD CAMPUS in California during a campus visit by Jean MacLeod and her daughter Lily.