

10 Tips to Prepare Your Child for Boarding School

Whether or not your child is a boarder, here are some tips for adjusting to boarding school
Dean of Student Life, Wendy Skinner

1. Let your child do the packing. You can help them organize the list and help with the shopping, but it will help your child know where their items are if they have packed the items themselves. **Less is more.** Your child can purchase pretty much anything they need either in Hudson or nearby (or online). They may want to experience a couple of weeks of school to decide what clothing or dorm furnishings they need/want, for example.
2. Talk about the importance of voicing their opinion, about the little things, like whether or not they like the window open, and about bigger things, like when it's okay to have friends in the room. Also talk about active listening (fully concentrating on what the other person is saying and responding, for example) and compromise. Living with people who may not see things the same way you do is a good learning experience and it can be hard for teenagers to imagine that someone sees something differently than they do.
3. Clarify your family values. What makes your family unique? How is your family just like everyone else's? What are your family's traditions? How do you celebrate? How do you manage problems? Talking about family systems and how they work before your child leaves home to practice living on their own (relatively speaking) helps them to think about their own family and see them — and other families — through other people's eyes. This will help them be open to engaging with and learning from their dorm mates.
4. Encourage your child to make healthy eating choices. Learning how to eat smart in a school dining hall, three meals a day takes practice. Talk about the importance of breakfast (WRA serves a GREAT breakfast every day of the week!), fresh fruits and vegetables (there is always fresh fruit available and a salad bar at lunch and dinner)...etc. Junk food and snacks have their place for sure. Regularly eating healthy food, though, will help your child have positive energy and strength to learn, play sports, act, make new friends and try new things.
5. Practice sleeping away from home for a night or two. Or longer. Going from never having spent a night away from home to living in a dorm room 24/7 is an abrupt adjustment. Your child should experience some separation from you (their parents) before coming to school. Although even students who've been away to summer camp for weeks over the summer can still experience homesickness, they have also typically learned some healthy coping strategies. Practice some of these skills this summer.

6. Allow your child to practice making their own decisions, like deciding what time to wake up, how to wake up, and when to go to bed over the summer. They will have many decisions to make on their own while they are away at school: what to eat, what to wear, when to do their homework, how to spend unstructured time. The more low stakes practice they get at home, the more likely they are to effectively make these decisions at school.
7. Talk about homesickness with your child. Homesickness, a universal and very typical feeling, is not a bad thing. It means your child loves and misses you, and experiencing homesickness helps people develop coping skills and develop independence. It is helpful to talk through a few strategies for dealing with homesickness (like trying to stay busy) before dropping your child off at boarding school.
8. Agree in advance how often and how you will communicate. And stick to that plan. Is early morning before classes a good time to talk? Between dinner and study hours? After study hours end at 10:00 p.m.? Texting multiple times a day with your child can inhibit their ability to fully immerse themselves in WRA life: the dorm, classes, sports, meals, downtime, and alone time. Not many folks send personal letters anymore (and teenagers are notoriously bad at this), but sending your child to school with some pre-addressed and stamped stationery can't hurt, and mailing them a letter before school starts is a nice touch. Having a letter waiting the first time they check their mailbox is a good feeling. Care packages are welcome. Including small touches and treats from home are a good idea; large quantities of junk food, valuables and money are not such a good idea.
9. Don't be surprised if your child expresses fear, self-doubt, sadness and a range of mixed emotions right before the departure to school. Even the most confident adolescent (or adult) on the eve of a major life change (and starting boarding school can be considered a major life change) may doubt why they ever thought this major life change was such a good idea. Remain reassuring about the decision to board at WRA. It's okay to share that you are nervous. It's likely you are. Restate your belief in your child, their qualities and skills and life experience. Remind them of a time they were worried or anxious in the past and about the positive outcome. Resist your child's plea to come home the first few weekends of school. We recommend waiting until after Parents' Weekend to allow them to come home. Don't make any deals about picking them up or changing schools if they are unhappy or unsuccessful. You have spent a lot of time and energy making the decision to board at WRA, and remind yourselves of that. That said, many students are ecstatic about beginning this new chapter of their life. Expect that, too.
10. Talk about making mistakes. It is likely your teenager will make a mistake or two while with us at WRA. They may sleep through a class, be late to a practice, not do as well as anticipated on an assignment, or miscommunicate with a friend. What is important--as we say in the Student Life Office--is to learn from the mistake and to not make the same mistake moving forward. Emphasize to your child that you do not expect perfection from them, and they should not expect it from themselves. Be sure to praise them for their hard work, perseverance, and determination. We value those traits and find them to be good predictors of future success.

Sources:

1. Colleagues, friends, former students..etc. Although obvious, many of these points have been gleaned from other folks.
2. Christopher Thurber Ph.D. and Jon Malinowski Ph.D.'s [The Summer Camp Handbook](#).