

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Social
Development
Research
Group



FIRST YEARS AWAY FROM HOME: LETTING GO AND STAYING CONNECTED

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MISSION OF SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- Conduct research on factors that influence development
- Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- Study service systems and work to improve them
- Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

A NEW HANDBOOK HELPS FAMILIES PREPARE FOR A HEALTHY START IN COLLEGE

Researchers at the Social Development Research Group and the Department of Human Development at Washington State University (WSU), led by WSU's [Dr. Laura Hill](#), created a handbook to help parents advise their young adult children leaving for their first year of college. The goal of the handbook was to increase family connections and reduce risky behaviors like drug and alcohol use. Research findings about the handbook's effectiveness were recently published in *Prevention Science*.

The handbook, called "First Years Away from Home: Letting Go and Staying Connected," provides suggestions for clarifying values and expectations on a number of topics, including substance use, in a productive way that supports students' autonomy. The 14-page handbook is mailed to families of incoming students early in the summer. Parents and students are encouraged to work through the handbook content together at regular intervals throughout the summer. Because the intervention is self-directed, family members can also revisit key sections after the student has left for college. Specifically, the intervention gives parents information on emerging adulthood, describes important challenges and opportunities that students experience during the transition to college, and provides a research-informed background about why parents remain important in the lives of their college



students. Going beyond substance use, the book is a guide to starting discussions about expectations that both parents and students have for college. The book includes activities such as a financial planning worksheet and covers topics like how often students will call home, what grades are expected, and who will pay for textbooks, laundry, and meals.

THE PARENTING HANDBOOK IS SHOWN TO REDUCE SUBSTANCE USE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

The research team conducted a study of the handbook's effectiveness. The study recruited 919 parent-student duos at WSU—two thirds of whom received the handbook—and monitored them through regular surveys from the summer before their first semester at college through the last semester of the students' second year. Researchers say the study shows that reinforcement of expectations leads to students using substances less often than their peers whose parents did not receive the handbook. The research team also found that, although increases in past-month alcohol use, binge drinking, and cannabis use were normative in the first months of college, these increases were not as high among students whose families used the handbook. For example:

- Students whose families used the handbook (the intervention group) reported their alcohol use over the past 30 days had increased 28% after they got to college, compared to a 39% increase among students whose parents didn't receive the book (the control group).
- Cannabis use went up 23% for control group students, but only 16% for the intervention group students.
- Binge drinking increased by 41% for the control group versus 33% for the intervention group, and extreme binge drinking—more than 10 drinks in a sitting—increased by 13% for the control group compared to 9% for the intervention group.

One UW parent reached out to write:

Greetings - just wanted to report that we completed the two activities (values & expectations) in the Parent Handbook you sent us earlier in the summer. What a fabulous experience! We were very excited to identify and address gaps in communication at this stage of our teen's development. We even involved her younger teenage sister and did the exercises round robin style. It was meaningful, helpful, and super fun. Thank you for putting the guide together. We're more excited than ever to have M join UW later this month.

UNIVERSITIES SEE VALUE IN THE HANDBOOK

Given the promising results of the study, the Washington Health Care Authority funded distribution of the handbook to families of incoming students at six universities in the state ahead of the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years, including more than 7,000 handbooks per year to parents of incoming freshmen at the University of Washington. The handbook has not been made available to the public, although it may be distributed more widely in the future.

This research demonstrates the importance of parents in the lives of their children beyond secondary education. According to study co-author Kevin Haggerty, "We helped design key areas, such as helping parents become more of a coach, a cheerleader, and an advisor to their children. I was a parent of kids going to college and you often think your kids don't want to hear from you. The opposite is true. It's just that the relationship changes—to more of a coach, cheerleader, and advisor."

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC, PLEASE REFER TO THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE:

Hill, L. G., Bumpus, M., Haggerty, K. P., Catalano, R. F., Cooper, B. R., & Skinner, M. L. (2023). "Letting Go and Staying Connected": Substance use outcomes from a developmentally targeted intervention for parents of college students. *Prevention Science*, 24, 1174-1186.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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