


Preteen/Teen: BEHAVIOR/DISCIPLINE

## Senioritis

by Michael Riera, Ph.D.

*Teachers of seniors  
may find this  
article useful.*  
— 

**Dear Dr. Mike**

My daughter is a second semester senior. Since she was accepted into college (in mid-April) she has seemingly stopped caring about everything: school work, friends, and us. What is going on here, and is there anything I can do?

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**Dr. Mike Responds**

Ah yes, this is commonly referred to as "senioritis" in high schools across the country. For college-bound seniors, the stretch of time from college acceptance through graduation, and all the way to the beginning of college is murky at best. On one hand there is delight over finally choosing a college—especially if it is one that your daughter highly desired. But on the other hand are the prospects of leaving behind everything she has worked so hard for: friends, family, an identity, and a comfortable community. These two worlds are at odds with one another, which requires a new level of mature integration on the part of teenagers. This is no easy task and includes numerous moments of regression into old patterns and progression into imagined future patterns.

The regressive moments are easy to spot. This is when your daughter is acting like a little kid, not the eighteen-year-old you have come to know in this past year. The progressive moments are detectable in the new assumptions from which they are making decisions—going out on school nights and blowing off curfews. Both types of behavior feel irresponsible to parents. So, what to do with all this?

1. Understand that once college plans are set you are dealing with a very different phase of adolescent growth. They need you more as a trusted consultant than ever before. They also need you to hold them to re-negotiated limits and structures. (Keep in mind the working definition of self-esteem as the experience of positively influencing the world around you. This means that when they sincerely negotiate new limits and structures with you they are also enhancing their interpersonal effectiveness and esteem.)
2. Understand that your experience of their senior year and graduation is very different than their experience. From

your perspective they are graduating and leaving *home*, which puts you in a passive position. From their perspective they are leaving home, leaving friends, and leaving an established identity, all based on a leap of faith into the unknown. Or, as one senior said just prior to graduation: "I'm ready for college, I'm just not ready to leave high school yet."

3. For seniors, second semester is a time of consolidation. Essentially, they are consolidating their high school experience into memorable moments. Where there are a shortage of these moments they set about to create them--witness the traditional events of Senior Skip Day and Senior Prank. Thus, this is also a time when kids try out new behaviors, as there is no more next year as far as their high school careers are concerned. Not only are they cramming for exams, they are also cramming for high school experiences.

4. In order to consolidate these memories seniors need to know how they marked those around them--teachers, friends, and family. As parents it is useful to reminisce with your kids about their school days and childhoods in your family. (It is a great idea to leave old family albums laying around the house to spark these moments.) Let them know how they marked you. Include, along with the positives and the negatives, the odd little moments that stand out in your mind. This lets them know you have been watching and remembering. It also makes it easier for them to move on. If they do not know how they marked you, then they will frequently act out in some way to get your attention--negative attention, while not as good as positive attention, is better than nothingness.

In this regard, I have noticed that when teachers consciously go out of their way to let the graduating seniors know how they marked them--through shared activities, conversations, or mental snapshots--the cases of senioritis are less severe.

5. Give them something tangible to help with the transition from high school to college--a transitional object in the best sense of the phrase. This could be a collection of photos, letters or audio tapes from family members, or anything that symbolizes their life and success at home and in school. These serve as reminders of their strengths as they set out to re-establish themselves all over again in college.

Starting this process prior to graduation--and continuing through the summer--helps them feel more secure in the inevitable changes ahead, and, keeps you feeling active as a

parent. In short, expect inconsistency, catch them being good, and understand that this is a difficult and exhilarating time in their lives--and yours too.

Best of luck.