

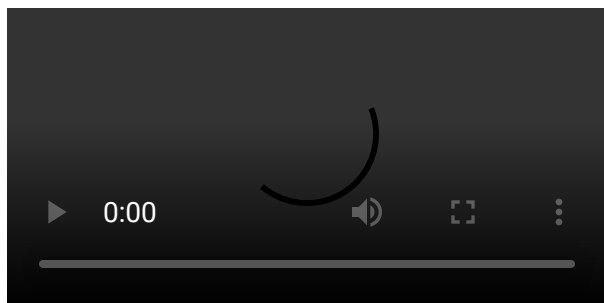
When to Consider a Gap Year Program

childmind.org/article/when-to-consider-a-gap-year-program

Support for students who aren't ready for college

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When the time comes for kids to start applying to college, it isn't that uncommon for parents and teens to want to take a step back. College students are taking longer to graduate — [only 41 percent](#) receive their bachelor's degree within 4 years — with the unfortunate consequence that young adults are watching their student loans accumulate faster than their class credits. For some students, taking a gap year before starting college might put them on stronger footing. But how do families know if a gap year is right for them?

Why a gap year might make sense

There are many reasons why teenagers might not be ready for college. They might need help with:

- Organization
- Self-advocacy
- [Emotional regulation](#)
- Getting motivated for college
- Deciding what to study
- Feeling burned out from high school
- A mental health or learning disorder

Alan Katz, the father of a student who ended up taking a gap year, said that his son had a tough couple years in high school while he was struggling with anxiety and depression. While his son was smart and capable, he wasn't motivated and had difficulty concentrating when he got to class.

“It was beyond clear that he wouldn't thrive in a college setting at that time,” said Katz. Instead, the family began research gap year programs “to put the brakes on everything. To give him the chance to take a break and to catch up and grow up.”

Matthew Cruger, PhD, the senior director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute, says that parents often have a sense of when a child isn't ready for college but they often,

understandably, are worried their teen will lose momentum if they don't go on immediately. The right gap year program could be a way to ensure that kids keep moving forward.

A program to give kids extra support or preparation may be particularly important for students who have an emotional or *learning disorder*

and may otherwise be at risk of dropping out. "We've seen a lot of kids who've failed out," notes Dr. Cruger. "A lot of students who have a disability go off to college thinking the disability is gone and are not really prepared for the demands of college. They don't have a sense of what college is for or about."

Anxiety is also a common barrier in his experience. He describes kids having a [hard time leaving their room](#), which means that they miss class. "Then they'd imagine that they shouldn't go to class the next time because their professor would be mad at them. All these things play a factor."

Other kids might need some additional academic work to prepare them for college, or need help bolstering their [organizational skills or other important life skills](#). The ability to advocate for yourself becomes essential in college, and many kids need practice learning how to ask for what they need and even how to investigate the support options that may be available to them on campus.

And for kids who are feeling burned out or unmotivated, a gap year provides the opportunity to gain real world experience, notes Jodi Musoff, MA, MEd, an educational specialist at the Child Mind Institute who has experience counseling students on gap years. "Traveling nationally or internationally, or doing some intensive volunteer work, allows them to get a greater view of the world at large and see people outside of their bubble," she says. "That can help kids get a better direction of where they want to go with their life and better appreciate the education portion of their college experience."

Different kinds of gap year programs

There is a wide range of gap year programs with very different goals. Deciding what your child is looking for in a gap year will help you pick what kind of program would be a good fit.

Bridge programs

Some programs simulate a college experience, although the academic pace is less intense and it comes with a lot of built-in support. These are sometimes called "bridge" programs. These programs are designed to give kids a chance to practice taking college classes before it "counts." This is a good option for kids who need to build stronger [organizational skills](#) or learn to advocate for themselves. College is generally the first time kids live on their own and many kids — especially those who struggle with executive function skills like organizing, prioritizing and making decisions — simply aren't prepared.

"This might be their first time needing to make decisions about a schedule that is not preplanned for them," notes Musoff. "Things like creating a schedule can be really challenging for some kids, so doing that without the intense academic demands can be beneficial."

Examples include: The [Thames program](#) at Mitchell College and Landmark College's [Bridge Experience](#) and [Transition at College](#).

Taking a fifth year

Another option, which is often called a "fifth year" or a "post-graduate year" gives teenagers the opportunity to enroll in a private school as a postgraduate student doing independent study in a school-

based setting. This can be an attractive option for students who want to fill in gaps in their high school transcripts prior to applying to college while also working on things like organization and self-advocacy in an environment that offers more mentorship. Because these programs are typically at boarding schools, they also give teens a chance to practice living away from home in a dorm that still offers more structure than you'd expect from a traditional college.

Examples include [Cheshire Academy](#), [Northfield Mount Hermon](#) and [Bridgton Academy](#).

Real world experiences

Some kids will be looking outside of the classroom to practice building skills that will make them more successful in college or just to get a better sense of what they might want to do in college and beyond. For some kids, volunteering or doing an internship may be the answer. Schools are sometimes able to assist in finding internships for students looking for a real world employment experience. There are also specialized programs that set up volunteer or internship opportunities for students while also providing them with individualized support as they practice building academic, social and life skills.

Other teens may look to programs that involve traveling or rigorous task- and adventure-oriented trips. Katz's son ended up going on an Outward Bound-type program for young people. He said that the program was attractive to them because it involved "aspects of leadership and teamwork and all the stuff that we know would help him." Students on the program would go hiking and kayaking and need to do their own cooking and cleaning, taking turns being leaders and followers. "This would give him some perspective that he didn't get in class or the soccer field," Katz said, noting that it would hopefully look good on a resume, too.

Examples include: The [Transitions program](#) at Winston Preparatory School and [NOLS](#), or the National Outdoor Leadership School.

Picking a gap year program

College counselors are often a good resource when it comes to thinking about a gap year. There is a dizzying range of programs and counselors may be able to advise you on what kinds of programs to research and then help you narrow down the options. Ideally, as your child's college counselor they should have a good idea of what your teen's strengths and weaknesses are and how a particular program may — or may not — be a good fit.

Some families also hire an [independent educational consultant](#) who specializes in gap year programs. Dr. Cruger explains that educational consultants work "as counselor and as a consultant. They have visited and toured a bunch of these places and learned about the programs and the staff. They have more advanced knowledge about the range of options that are available and they work for the family."

Whether you work with a college counselor and do your own research or involve an educational consultant, thinking seriously with your child about what your goals are and how a program will fulfill those goals is essential.

Musoff notes, "If the goal is planning and organization and you're going on a fully guided traveling trip where you have a chaperone telling you exactly what you're going to be doing every day and planning it out for you, that's not really going to help to develop those skills. You have to think about the purpose of the year and think about what about that program is going to build that."

Katz agrees, recommending that families focus on “what kind of gap year program might help for what ails you today and how it will affect you and position you for tomorrow.”

He also emphasized that whatever stigma used to be associated with gap years seems to have vanished. “What’s paramount is that every kid is different,” he says. “We really learned that in the past few years. Everyone learns differently and everyone takes a different path. The reality is every time parents heard that our son was going on a gap year program they said they wished we would have brought it up sooner because they might have considered one, too.”

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