

Choosing a College for Your Child With Mental Health Needs

Going beyond the regular campus tours to see how schools support their students.

Candida Fink [Psychology Today](#) February 7, 2023

KEY POINTS

- Colleges must provide reasonable accommodations for equitable access for mental health and neurodevelopmental disabilities.
- The quality and accessibility of student supports vary widely among schools.
- For teens with mental health or neurodevelopmental needs, living with a roommate can offer challenges that make or break success at school.

As I write this, many families with kids who are juniors in high school are beginning the traditional college visit road trips, in anticipation of the application process in their senior year. These trips can be a lot of fun—many families really enjoy them as some relaxing, happy times together. But if you and your child have navigated mental health and/or neurodevelopmental needs such as anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism spectrum disorder, it can also be a time of tremendous worry.

Can my child get a 504 plan in college?

Often, you have spent years developing school supports and accommodations, as well as a mental health team, to help your child succeed in school. What happens when they get to college? **Putting accommodations and supports into place at the college level is a different process than in K–12. The special education laws and the K–12 education section 504 of disability law don’t apply. But there are disability protections for disabled students after 12th grade. Colleges need to provide reasonable accommodations to create equitable access for students with disabilities, including mental health and neurodevelopmental disabilities.**

Unfortunately, the quality and accessibility of student supports vary widely among schools. A true commitment to supporting students who require accommodations is different than a stock photo and a nicely worded statement on the Web site. Before you and your high-school junior even start to make a list of places to visit, it can help to get some input from people who have gone through this process before—this can give you some ballpark ideas of what people have found on the ground, rather than what’s in the PR material from the school.

How do I find out what supports are available?

It’s great if your high schooler is open to participating in this process, but even if they aren’t ready yet, you can do a little background research, which could include the following:

- Speaking to your child’s guidance counselor about what they know about this topic and what schools they are aware of that have strong support systems in place.
- Asking every parent you know with high-school and college-age children what they know and if they have had any experiences—good or bad—with particular schools.

- If your school or district has a special education PTA or something like it—they may be a resource for some of this information. Your psychiatrist or therapist may have some thoughts as well.

Once you are putting together your travel plans and have specific schools on your list of places to see, do a deeper dive into how each school's support services are set up and how accessible they are. At this stage, it's **valuable for your child to participate in this process as they begin to think seriously about what schools they might consider. They may not have considered disability accommodations and supports as important to their decision-making, so this is a good place to start this conversation with them.** This level of research can include steps such as these:

- **Exploring the student services/disabilities office Web pages and looking closely at the application that will be required for your child to receive accommodations similar to what they had in high school:** What documentation will you need? Will your child need a new neuropsychological testing battery to get ADHD accommodations, for example? That type of testing can take a long time to set up and can be very expensive.
- **Finding out what types of academic support services are available:** Does the office document and help your student access their accommodations? What's the process for setting up accommodations for each exam? Is it online or does the student have to go in person? Do they offer more active supports such as weekly check-ins? Call or visit the office while on campus to dig a little deeper.

What about mental health supports like counseling?

Beyond academic accommodations, you want to find out what mental health resources are available. **Visiting the health/mental health center while you are on campus is worthwhile**—and you can ask questions such as the following:

- How hard is it to get in to see a counselor on campus? What is the waiting list like?
- Is the mental health center easily accessed from the dorms and class buildings?
- Can someone see a campus therapist long-term, or just for a few weeks or months?
- What systems are in place for mental health crises?

What else should I consider?

Another important consideration is the availability of housing accommodations. For most teens, living with a roommate or roommates will offer new challenges, but **for some kids with mental health or neurodevelopmental needs, those challenges can make or break success at school. Most schools offer the possibility of “medical singles” for both physical and mental health disabilities.** But I recently saw one school that precluded any mental health needs as a reason for housing accommodations. It may not be on your or your child's mind right now, but it's worth knowing what's available as you are looking at schools.

In my experience, **schools may say the right things about caring for students' mental health, but on-the-ground follow-through is inconsistent.** Your child may not be especially interested in this information when they are looking at schools, but encouraging them to explore this with you can help them take on a more active role in managing their mental health needs as they prepare to go to college. A campus that has strong leadership around and commitment to supporting kids with mental health needs and that provides truly accessible resources can make or break a child's success during the transition to college.