

Understanding the first year

Starting university and making adjustments throughout their first year is both exciting and daunting for students, but it is also a time of adjustment for parents. Knowing the type of situations, pressures and issues students are likely to be experiencing at any time should help you understand what's going on and know how you can best help them.

Typical student issues throughout the first year

We have pulled together some of the key issues that students have told us they face at different points throughout the year and some suggestions of how you might be able to help them. Different students react in different ways to starting university and we realise that parents are often best placed to know whether their son or daughter is coping or not.

We hope these tips will be useful for you and help make the journey easier for everyone!

August

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- Worries about making friends and fitting in are key for all prospective students.
- Students who are moving away from home are likely to be nervous about the responsibilities they will be taking on when they move out.
- The practicalities of organising everything before they start at university is often a stress for students.

What can you do to help?

- Encourage your son or daughter to join some online forums/social networking sites - it'll help reassure them that other students are feeling the same as them.
- If this is going to be their first time away from home, it might be time for a refresher on some basic domestic skills, such as **cooking** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/getcooking/index.aspx>), shopping, using a washing machine or maybe even changing their bed.
- Help your son or daughter organise themselves by going through our **things to do before arriving (/welcome/before/index.aspx)** and **what to pack (/welcome/before/whattopack.aspx)** checklists and encouraging them to use their Student Diary to plan their time.

September

- Your son or daughter will probably be quite nervous as well as excited about starting university.
- Making friends is key to all students. If students have not made really strong friendships in the first few days/weeks they may feel that they're not going to fit in, but these things can take a bit longer, depending on the situation.
- Homesickness and feelings of not fitting in are very common for students moving away for the first time.
- Exhaustion from lots of nights out.

What can you do to help?

- Encourage them to get involved and meet as many people as possible - successful transition to university is often dependent on students' level of involvement and social networks, as these can provide much needed support in times of difficulty. There are lots of opportunities to **get involved and make friends (/welcome/before/makingfriends.aspx)** during Welcome Week and throughout the rest of the year.
- If your son or daughter is going to be living at home, encourage them to get involved with the specific events and groups available for them, such as the Staying Local event and the Home Students Association.
- Reassure your son or daughter they may need to give it some time before they make their close friends. There are many different ways of **making friends (/welcome/before/makingfriends.aspx)** at university and once students become immersed in their studies or get involved in some clubs/societies, they are likely to have a wider group of contacts, which should help them find their niche.
- If your son or daughter is experiencing any problems with accommodation, shared living, their academic course, finances or their general wellbeing, the University's **Student Mentor Scheme (SMS) (/undergraduate/support/mentor.aspx)** can help. Whether it's a one off problem or a need for more regular support, our fully trained Mentors and professional support staff are here to help our students resolve any issue they may face during their time at Birmingham.
- Try to reassure students that homesickness is quite normal, but that they are likely to feel better if they stay and work through it, rather than returning home at the first opportunity (although each student is different).
- If your son or daughter is feeling run down with the quantity of late nights, their friends are probably feeling the same. Why not suggest they arrange a quieter social occasion, such as the cinema, a film night or a dinner out - their friends are likely to be quite glad of the change too.
- Is your son or daughter looking for a job on campus? **Worklink** (<https://www.worklink.bham.ac.uk/WorkLink/index.asp>) is the University's recruitment service, based at the **Guild of Students** (<http://www.guildofstudents.com/>), which connects students with on-campus casual work. Students can visit the Worklink website to register for job alerts, apply online and for help with CVs and interview techniques. Working during university can be an excellent way for students to learn to manage time and budgets, and can provide them with some valuable experience in preparation for their future.

October

- A big hurdle for many students at this point is managing their time effectively, as they are likely to be juggling a much greater variety of responsibilities than they have been used to. Simple domestic chores, such as cooking, shopping and laundry can become stressful when accompanied by their increased academic workload.
- Students are likely to be feeling a bit more settled a few weeks in, and may be settling into a routine, where they are getting to grips with independent study (however, often students are still struggling with this several months in).
- If they are living in shared accommodation, this is the time when students relax a bit and most likely when some tensions arise.
- A few weeks into their course students may have doubts about whether they have chosen the correct course for them.

What can you do to help?

- Encourage students to consider all of the things they need to do together (academic, domestic and social), so that they can prioritise and order them in most effective way. Have a look at our **time management** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/time-management.aspx>) tips.
- Remind students to write down everything they need to do - often having a whole list of things floating around inside their heads can be the biggest distraction from actually getting any of them done.
- If your son or daughter is not feeling settled, remind them that they could get in contact with their personal tutor or someone from another **support service**

(<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/index.aspx>) to discuss any issues and that addressing a problem will not be seen as a weakness.

- Remind them that communication is key to shared living, but if they have any major problems to contact the **Student Mentor Scheme (SMS)** (<http://www.guildofstudents.com/studentmentors>) or the relevant person in their accommodation site.
- Remind students that eating well is key to their health and wellbeing. The **Get Cooking! website** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/getcooking/index.aspx>) is available for student friendly, inexpensive recipes.
- If they are having second thoughts about their **choice of course** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/changing-course.aspx>), encourage them to talk to their personal tutor as soon as possible to see what their options are.

November/December

- Most students have a reading week around the middle of the term. They may want to come home for a bit of tlc, while others may want to remain at the University and continue to settle in.
- First assignments are usually due around this time.
- Students will be looking forward to having a good break, enjoying home comforts and probably preparing for exams and assignments in the New Year.
- Returning home can be difficult for some students, as they have become used to their new environment and independence.
- Surprisingly many students start to think about housing for the following year around November.

What can you do to help?

- Try to be understanding if your son or daughter is not as communicative as you hope. Students have told us they often feel too busy to keep in close contact with their parents.
- If your son or daughter feels they are struggling with their assignments, remind them that there is **study support** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/study-skills-and-support.aspx>) available to help them adjust.
- Why not make the transition back home easy by being open about any expectations you have on your son or daughter's time from the outset.
- Your son or daughter may appreciate receiving 'student friendly' Christmas presents, such as ink cartridges, stationery or maybe even a travel subscription.
- The University and the Guild of Students advise students not to sign housing contracts too early (i.e. before they are comfortable with the group of friends they are considering living with and where they would like to live). If students do not feel settled with a group of potential flat/house mates, there will be housing events held in January and some some places are held in University accommodation for second year students.
- Students may appreciate your support in making the decision about their housing and the process involved.
- If your son or daughter is experiencing any problems with accommodation, shared living, their academic course, finances or their general wellbeing, the University's **Student Mentor Scheme (SMS)** can help. Whether it's a one off problem or a need for more regular support, our fully trained Mentors and professional support staff are here to help our students resolve any issue they may face during their time at Birmingham.

January/February

- Many students feel a bit unsettled about returning to university after their long Christmas break.
- Lots of students see the start of term 2 as a chance to do everything better (keep up to date, get more involved, see more of the city).
- Many students will have exams at this time.
- All first year students will be expected to attend a **Transition Review** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/transitionreview/index.aspx>) meeting with their personal tutor at this time. While this is a formal review of their progress, students should not be concerned by it. Staff will be looking for ways to reassure and support students to make improvements, rather than judging their failures.

What can you do to help?

- Again, reassure them that it is quite normal to feel unsettled at this point. If problems become more significant, ask them to seek support through the appropriate **support service** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/index.aspx>).
- Encourage students to improve their working habits, get more involved, etc, but not to become too disappointed if they don't manage it as well as they would like.
- There is general information about **exams** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/learning-spaces/exams/help.aspx>) on the website, but students may need to talk to their tutor to get information specific to their course.
- Encourage students to be prepared for their **Transition Review** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/transitionreview/index.aspx>) meeting by thinking about the areas for discussion and completing the required information. They can also take advantage of the additional activities that will be advertised around this time to help students get involved in University life.

March/April

- This is typically revision time. Most students will have some form of exam or assessment looming and this is likely to take precedence over many other things in their lives. Many students feel that they would like to be better informed about the process, but are unsure how to get the information.
- Some students are uncertain about how they will get on with the further reduction in the structure of their time during term 3.
- Students may feel that they want to talk to someone about their concerns (whether they are up to standard, studying the correct content, worries about their individual circumstances), but think they will be seen as weak if they do.
- Students at this stage often can't believe that their first year is almost over and worry that they haven't made enough of the opportunities available to them.

What can you do to help?

- There is general information about **exams** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/learning-spaces/exams/help.aspx>) on the website, but students may need to talk to their tutor to get information specific to their course.
- Encourage students to draw up a revision timetable so that they can monitor their progress and also to think about their **time management** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/time-management.aspx>).
- Try to reassure them that seeking support is not a sign of weakness and that any member of staff should recognise this. You could help by encouraging your son or daughter to get in touch with their personal tutor or the appropriate **support service** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/projects/support/index.aspx>).
- Try to remind your son or daughter of all that they have achieved (getting settled in a completely new environment, handing in first assignments, making new friends and possibly living away from home for the first time) and that there will be plenty of opportunities to get involved in the things they want to in future years or even after their exams. This may be a good time to make a list of things they would like to achieve in the following year.

May/June

This is exam and finishing up time for the majority of students.

- Exams are key for most students.
- Many students are making or finalising their plans for the summer.
- Students living in University accommodation will need to clear out all of their personal belongings.
- After students finish their exams they will probably want to let their hair down, go to their summer ball, do the sightseeing they haven't had the chance to do throughout the year.

What can you do to help?

- Encourage students to **eat well** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/studentervices/projects/getcooking/index.aspx>) and get plenty of rest during this stressful time.
- Make sure your son or daughter is aware of the moving out date for their accommodation and have made the necessary arrangements for clearing out their flat and transporting and/or storing their things over the summer.
- Try to encourage your son or daughter to do something over the summer that may help them in the future careers. Internships, work experience, travel or catching up with their reading are all good. Students can talk to our friendly staff in **Careers Network** (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/careers/first-years/index.aspx>) about what they can do now to improve their future prospects.

Any other ideas?

If you have any suggestions of issues that students face and how parents could help, please email us on welcome@contacts.bham.ac.uk (<mailto:welcome@contacts.bham.ac.uk>).

We would love to hear your feedback on our site. Please fill out this form or email us at welcome@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

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