

Moving on: Family in transition

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

We are living, as Adam said to Eve, in a time of transition. Our son John graduated from high school and turned 18 on the same day. His brother, Andy, turned ten on the day of John's senior prom. The boys are turning corners, and their parents are turning, well, a bit dog-eared at the edges.

Here's how we marked the transitions. We celebrated Andy's birthday in advance so that John could be on hand, with a day of mini-golf and bumper boats in the park. Andy got a volcano kit for reenacting Pompeii, a hit-away kit for improving his batting, a Pokémon game with cheat codes for conquering the world, a yo-yo for maintaining his cosmic alignment and one significant disappointment: though we already had the tickets, we decided not to let him see the new *Star Wars* movie. The film review Web site Screenit.com—a great boon to parents—warned us that there would be scenes like this one: “Cut down to just a torso with one mechanical arm, Anakin catches on fire on the bank of a lava river. He becomes completely engulfed in flames and screams in pain/terror until we see just a burned/charred/smoking torso lying there.” Enough said. If only we hadn't promised it as a special birthday treat. If only it weren't so extensively marketed to children. If only the other parents shared our trepidations. Still, we felt we had to draw the line.

The night of the prom, we gathered with other families in the park outside the school, took pictures of John and his friends in their rented tuxes and marveled at the stretch limos and the baroquely coiffed girls in their strapless black and pink gowns, with their baubles, braids, ruffles and flounces arranged just so, wobbling atop impossibly spiky Cinderella-lucite evening sandals. Andy asked, “Is this a circus?”

No curfew tonight, we told John, gulping, dutifully observing parental “best practices” for the occasion. After the prom, go ahead and hang out with your buddies as long as you like. My high school senior class didn't have a prom, but we did ride the Staten Island ferry back and forth all night, and something of the sort seems *de rigueur*. At midnight, however, John came home, reporting that the prom

was “fun, but boring,” and that he and his friends were kind of tired anyway.

Andy surprised us, too. Instead of fussing about the *Star Wars* movie, he went up to his room and began making light sabers out of modeling clay, acting out the plot as he learned it from his friends. He pronounced himself quite content, even relieved, that he wouldn’t be spending his birthday watching gory scenes on the big screen. We watched an Andy Griffith rerun instead, basking in the feeling of family togetherness and acutely aware that it won’t be quite like this next year.

The mail was full of tidings of John’s coming of age. From the state elections department, a mail-in voter registration form. From the Selective Service, a brochure about registering for the draft: “MEN: 18-25 YEARS: YOU CAN HANDLE THIS. *It’s quick. It’s easy. It’s the law.*” And from the college John will be attending in the fall, a pamphlet for parents with a calendar of “Transition Issues” to expect. In September, there will be exhilaration, homesickness and anxiety about classes. In October, there will be exam hurdles, roommate problems, exhaustion and lingering attachments to friends left behind. In November, flu. In December, roommate problems again, and sadness about leaving new friends.

John was not terribly impressed by the Transition Issues calendar. “Mom,” he said, “Zaleskis don’t have issues. Zaleskis don’t do transitions. Therefore Zaleskis don’t have Transition Issues.” John has a finely tuned psychobabble detector, and the “MEN 18-25 YEARS: YOU CAN HANDLE THIS” message is more to his liking.

Of course there will be transitions, and it’s good to know that faculty and administrators care about how our sons and daughters will weather them. But it’s not entirely comforting to a parent to hear that at some colleges the dorm advisers assist freshmen with their Transition Issues by keeping baskets of condoms outside their rooms. It’s not entirely comforting to discover that one of the most highly touted college counseling centers in the country provides, on its widely recommended sexual health Web site, tips on sadomasochistic role-playing and warnings against advocates of abstinence until marriage: “The ‘until marriage’ emphasis discriminates against people who choose not to marry, or who are gay, for whom marriage is illegal.” It’s enough to make me put my own Transition Issues on a calendar, like a college president I remember fondly who used to schedule her nervous breakdowns well in advance.

But the excitement of seeing one son heading for a wonderful college and another entering his double digits overrides the trepidations. I believe our boys will find their

way, with God's help. They have their own compass and sextant; they can see through whatever misguided guidance comes their way. The message has arrived: "MIDDLE-AGED MOMS: YOU CAN HANDLE THIS," and, in hopeful anticipation, I'm ready to sign on.