

## Staying Sane During College Applications

By Ellen Parlapiano

You can slog through guidebooks and surf the Web all you want, but nothing prepares a parent for the college application process better than advice from people who've gone through it. I've survived it twice now. What I learned through research, talking to experts and personal experience will help you be part of your kid's search for a school that fits--without going nuts.

### Ground Rules

Applying to college is a marathon, not a sprint. Memorize these mantras.

- **There's a school for everybody.** The notion of fierce competition is a huge distraction from the fact that "Most teens end up at colleges they love," says Cheryl Paradis, Psy.D., associate professor of psychology at Marymount Manhattan College in New York, and coauthor of *Tackling College Admissions* (Rowman & Littlefield).
- **Get in the zone.** The way to all but guarantee a happy ending to your kid's search is to target realistic prospects, says Peter Van Buskirk, author of *Winning the College Admission Game* (Peterson's). "Don't discount a college just because you haven't heard of it or it looks like it's easy to get into," he says. Neither has any bearing on whether your child could thrive there. When my son Matt wanted to apply to colleges for TV production, we discovered a number of under-the-radar schools that were not only welcoming but generous with scholarship money. He's a senior at one of them now, and he can't imagine being anywhere else.
- **Organization saves the day.** Set up a system to track paperwork. It should include bins with hanging folders for each school, files for financial aid and supplemental materials, and a centrally located calendar for plotting deadlines.
- **Silence is golden.** Resist the urge to talk about college constantly. "Kids don't want to hear at 7 a.m., 'I think you should take another look at Syracuse,'" says Louise Morgenstern, a mom of three from Santa Monica, California. Martha Merrill, dean of admissions and financial aid at Connecticut College in New London, suggests designating one day per week when you can ask questions or voice concerns, then keeping quiet the rest of the time. Just be sure to emphasize to your teen that he can pipe up anytime.
- **"We" aren't applying to college.** This is your kid's journey,

not yours. "Definitely allow her to keep ownership over the process," says Carol J. DelPropost, assistant vice president of admission and financial aid at Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware, Ohio. She told her two daughters, "I'm here if you need me" and gladly set up campus visits and tests when asked. Beyond that, she purposely-and wisely-held back.

## Sizing Up Schools

Forget about prestige and the handful of colleges that always top the so-called hot lists. "A good school is where your child snaps into place like a puzzle piece," says Arlene Matthews, author of *Getting in Without Freaking Out* (Three Rivers Press). Here's how to find one.

- **Start with the big picture.** Ask your child to describe his dream college. "Focus on types, not names," says Missy Sanchez, director of college counseling at Woodward Academy, a school in College Park, Georgia. Consider size, location, climate, distance from home and campus vibe. Check out nearby campuses to get a sense of big versus small and liberal versus conservative. But, "Don't do formal tours until junior year," says Paradis. Kids shut down if you show them stuff too early, and you'll need test scores to know whether a school is a realistic option.
- **Nail down must-haves.** What's nonnegotiable? Amy wanted a school with a winning football team, daily newspaper, charming town and diverse student body. For Matt, a student-run TV station and being close to home were critical.
- **Dedicate time to research.** Amy scouted early options on the floor of our local bookstore, with giant guidebooks in her lap. But you can also use search engines ([collegeboard.com](http://collegeboard.com) and [princetonreview.com](http://princetonreview.com)) to find schools matching your child's preferences and academic stats. Log on to college websites for admissions info, blogs, chats and virtual tours.
- **Compile a master list.** The preliminary one might be long, but whittling it will get easier with time. The final list should have around eight schools, says Matthews-four targets (where student grades and test scores are within the average range accepted), two safeties (where she has well beyond what it takes to get in) and two reaches (highly selective schools or where student scores are on the low end of the average range accepted). Matthews also suggests including a "financial safety," like a state school or community college.

## Nailing the Application

This is what impacts whether your kid's file lands in the "Yes" pile.

- **Transcript.** The GPA should be solidly within the specified range, and your teen should be taking the most challenging courses possible and doing well in them. The more selective the college, the more emphasis there usually is on getting A's in advanced courses.
- **SATs/ACTs.** Most colleges accept both, so it's wise to have

your child take the PSAT and ACT in fall of junior year to see which she does better on, then focus efforts there, says Laura Wilson, founder of [wilsonprep.com](http://wilsonprep.com), an affordable online coaching service that's gaining popularity around the country. Poor test takers may wish to consider the 760 test-optional schools listed on [fairtest.org](http://fairtest.org).

- **Extracurriculars.** Schools generally favor students who dedicate themselves to a few key passions at the leadership level rather than dabbling in many. If your high school doesn't offer an activity that interests your teen, encourage him to organize one. "Colleges like resourceful students who create opportunities," says Elizabeth Wissner-Gross, author of *What High Schools Don't Tell You* (Hudson Street Press). But they also value work experience, so don't worry if your kid opts for a paying job at the mall instead of joining a lot of clubs or teams.
- **Letters of recommendation.** These should be lined up by mid-September, since teachers write them on a first-come-first-served basis. By far, the most memorable ones share specific anecdotes that reveal a student's character beyond what appears elsewhere in the application, says DelPropost. Ideally, at least one should be from a recent teacher in whose class your kid excelled, but don't rule out a teacher who witnessed your child struggle academically. For instance, someone who watched your daughter falter in physics but stick with it to nab a B can genuinely praise her work ethic and refusal to give up.
- **Short-answer questions.** Pay close attention to the one that asks, "Why do you want to come here?" According to Wissner-Gross, it's critical. Your teen should seize the opportunity to show why he's a great fit for the school, by mentioning precise things like courses he'd like to take and why, particular professors he wants to study with or observations from a campus visit.
- **Essays.** These should reveal a remarkable element of your teen's personality and something she cares deeply about. When we brainstormed what makes Amy unique, her list included "afraid of clowns," "played on boys' teams" and "only wakes up to sports radio." Since she's an aspiring sportswriter, her best essay was about playing on all-boy teams at camp and how doing so prepared her for a career in a male-dominated field. "I always urge my students to focus on something only they can write about," says Sanchez. The results come from the heart.

## Decisions, Decisions

Study up on these admissions terms.

**Common Application:** A single application and essay accepted by more than 300 schools, accessible at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org).

**Rolling Admission:** Applications are reviewed as soon as they are received, until all slots are filled.

**Early Decision (ED):** Your kid applies by early November and must enroll if accepted. Only do for an absolute number one choice.

**Early Action (EA):** An early November deadline and pre-Christmas

decision, but nonbinding, so your teen can still apply elsewhere.

**Deferred:** When ED and EA applications are neither accepted nor denied but considered with the regular- decision applicants for an April reply.

**Regular Decision:** Applications are due around January 1; answers arrive in April.

**Waitlist:** Status unknown until after May 1. In the meantime, submit a deposit to secure a spot at another school.

## Crib Sheet: Making the Most of a Campus Visit

Even though student blogs, virtual tours and streaming video can bring a college to life from afar, nothing beats hanging out in the student union, sampling the pizza and peeking in the dorms. Travel is costly, but try to swing as many visits as possible. Some do's and don'ts:

- **Do** make every effort to go when classes are in session. An empty campus just isn't the same, and the lack of student energy can bias you against a good school.
- **Don't** visit more than two schools in a day; the details will start to blur.
- **Do** explore from all angles. Attend the information session and tour, but wander around too. Hit the cafeteria and bookstore, chat up students and read school papers for an attitude check. Amy got turned off to one school after seeing so many dressed-up girls, then reading a newspaper article that bragged about having California's most beautiful students.
- **Don't** blow off your teen's observations-no matter how trivial they seem. I laughed when Amy counted how many kids wore the school shirt, until I realized that it was how she measured spirit. But I'll never understand why she rejected a school because it had an ugly smokestack!
- **Do** document each visit thoroughly in words and pictures. Besides jotting thoughts in a notebook, we used our cell phone cameras to remember dorms and quads.
- **Don't** editorialize. Open-ended questions like, "What did you think?" are okay, but avoid comments that might sway your kid's real feelings, such as "I didn't think you'd like a place where the classes are so big." When evaluating a visit, aim to let your teen speak first and last.

## What Teens Want You to Know

Teenagers want and need your help, but they don't want to be treated like babies. Here, kids share what helped-and what didn't-in their own words.

- **Chill out.** Know that there's such a thing as too much information. "I'm the oldest, so my parents were pretty clueless about the college process," says Becca Weinstein of Greenbrae, California. "They bought stacks of books and hired a private counselor. I appreciated the advice, but I

wish my mom and dad had taken a step back, calmed me down and reminded me that I could be happy anyplace."

- **Have faith.** Set a drop-dead date for completing applications, then trust your kid to meet it, says Lindsay Pike of Eastchester, New York. Kayla Bolton of Beverly Hills, Michigan, says, "My parents reminded me of deadlines every now and then, and of course I got annoyed. But I loved that they left the organization up to me. It helped me realize that I can deal with pressure."
- **Be discreet.** "When people asked, 'Where are you applying?' my mom just answered, 'Some very good schools,'" says Kayla. Have vague, scripted answers ready for nosy relatives and neighbors, like, "Oh, we're not allowed to talk about that until April 1."
- **Stay neutral.** "I hated it when my dad said, 'If it were me, I'd definitely go there,'" says Katie Stephens of Birmingham, Michigan. If you find it hard to be objective, opt for a joke to defuse tension. Even though Michigan resident Quinn Golinske's dad went to Michigan State University and she favored University of Michigan, he never pushed his choices on her. But, "He was pretty funny in the bookstore," she says. "At Michigan State he offered to buy me all sorts of stuff, but when I wanted a T-shirt at the University of Michigan, he looked at me and said with a grin, 'Don't you have any money?'"
- **Channel serenity.** "My parents never panicked and that helped me a lot," says Kayla. "It made me feel capable and confident that they believed I could handle things."

## Awesome Websites

### [Petersons.com](#)

The search tool pinpoints what kids are looking for in a school and generates a list of options.

### [FastWeb.com](#)

Sign up to receive scholarship alerts.

### [TheU.com](#)

Download student-produced campus life videos.

### [CollegesThatChangeLives.com](#)

Find excellent, lesser-known schools and info about free panel presentations and college fairs.

### [Collegeconfidential.com](#)

Tons of discussion threads on every possible college topic.

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