

Survive College-Application Season With the Family in One Piece

Tension between parents and high school seniors can run high this time of year—here’s how to keep everyone calm as deadlines and decisions loom

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Dec. 11, 2018

It’s a monthslong ordeal that could change the course of a high school senior’s life, leading to a choice that could cost tens of thousands of dollars or more. No wonder the college-application season can torpedo the holidays for teens and their parents.

Many students labor to meet early-winter deadlines for college applications, often under the anxious eyes of their parents. The resulting stress can damage family relationships if parents fail to set good boundaries and keep their own anxieties in check.

“Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks can pretty much be ruined by a poor college-application process,” says Stephanie Meade, an educational consultant in Sherman Oaks, Calif. “Parents talk about how it’s the last year the student will be living under their roof, and the last thing they want to do is to be fighting with them.”

The path is often rockiest for the oldest child. Pavanaja Reddy of New York was frustrated when her older daughter, now 20, resisted her suggestions on where to apply. “She could get into the Ivies. But that’s not what she had in her mind. It was a really bad time for both of us,” says Dr. Reddy, a physician. “There was a constant struggle with me telling her, ‘I’m the parent, I know what’s best for you,’ and her saying, ‘I know what’s best for myself.’ ”

Looking back, Dr. Reddy says, “I was thinking about what I would do rather than what she would do.” She sees now that her daughter, a junior at Case Western Reserve University, was well-informed and well-equipped to make her own decision.

When her second daughter, now 18 and a freshman at Rice University, applied last year, Dr. Reddy turned the decision over to her. Like a growing number of parents, she hired an independent educational consultant to support her. “I was having a glass of wine every day. I was totally relaxed,” she says. “We didn’t fight once.”

The application process is becoming more competitive. Students are applying to more schools and colleges are marketing their services more widely. Admission decisions are less predictable, as less competitive colleges reject more applicants who don’t show strong interest in an effort to lower their acceptance rates, a mark of selectivity and prestige. Meanwhile, getting into schools like Harvard and Stanford has never been tougher.

All this makes it hard for parents to resist meddling when teens are making such a significant decision. “The shift in responsibility from parent to child during college applications is almost a microcosm of the transition that takes place when the teenager leaves home,” says Julie Raynor Gross, president of Collegiate Gateway in New York. She coached Dr. Reddy’s daughter.

It’s also a rich opportunity for teens to learn decision-making strategies, from listing pros and cons to assessing how they feel on campus.

Some parents try to control the process in hopes of sending their child to an elite school, giving them bragging rights at cocktail parties. “They say, ‘The process is too important for it to be a learning experience. We have to manage it,’” Ms. Meade says. “I don’t agree. There are 3,000 four-year colleges in this country and most are wonderful places to get an education, if the student wants to work.”

Other parents get tempted to step in and speed things up a bit by taking charge of routine tasks. “It’s so easy to do something and check it off. It’s much harder to allow the student the time to fumble a bit,” says Jane Shropshire, an educational consultant in Lexington, Ky.

For much of the spring and summer, 18-year-old Maddie Orr didn’t feel like talking to her parents about college. This was true even though she spent nearly all her time prepping to take both the ACT and SAT exams twice, researching colleges and writing her essay on an emotional topic, a serious illness that temporarily disabled a close friend. “It was always on my mind, but I didn’t want to talk about it. I was still figuring everything out,” Maddie says.

“It’s hard to watch your kid struggle like that,” says her mother, Jane Orr of Rumson, N.J. But she and her husband kept a respectful distance while Maddie polished her essay and had other adults look it over. They’ve helped in other ways, accompanying Maddie on campus visits and offering encouragement. Still, hearing other parents talk about the admissions frenzy, Ms. Orr wondered if she and her husband were doing enough. Maddie is expecting word soon from two top choices.

Colleges have placed more importance on applicants’ essays as an indicator of their values and character. Parents are often tempted to rewrite or edit them heavily. Such meddling is usually obvious to admissions officers, however, who have a keen eye for teenagers’ authentic, and often imperfect, prose.

It also undermines students’ confidence. “This says to the student, ‘I don’t trust you to do this, so let me do it for you,’” says Ann Rossbach, a Rumson, N.J., educational consultant. “It’s demoralizing.” Parents should limit their role to helping brainstorm possible essay topics, she says.

While authenticity helps essays, bad grammar in emails to admissions officers is unwelcome. If students aren’t familiar with email protocol, provide a little coaching in advance on suitable greetings, punctuation and capitalization, says Joan K. Casey, president of Educational Advocates, a Brookline, Mass., consulting firm. Parents also should make sure students have a

system for organizing all the steps and deadlines, perhaps a spreadsheet, she says. The skills needed for such projects don't fully develop in some students until they're in their 20s.

Students are usually most satisfied when they own the outcome—even if they wind up at their parents' top choice. Christine DiCenso of Boston carefully avoided pressuring her daughter Caroline to attend her and her husband's alma mater, Boston College. Caroline says she challenged her mother, saying, "Come on, tell the truth. You want me to go to BC," but her mother stuck to her position, arguing that going someplace new would be exciting for Caroline.

Caroline agreed—until she got into her top choice, a Midwestern university, and toured the campus. She was surprised by its sprawling size and rural surroundings. "There are silos there. I had never seen one," she says.

Now 19, Caroline is a sophomore at Boston College. "I made my own decision," she says—and she loves it.

When Your Teens Apply to College

- Help them plan the high school courses that give them the best odds for admission.
- Give them experience managing and meeting deadlines before senior year.
- Calculate what colleges will expect parents to pay on FinAid or Fafsa4caster.
- Have a conversation with them by sophomore year about paying for college.
- Help plan and arrange campus visits.
- Take your cues from them, asking how you can help.
- Avoid recycling your own college dreams with them.
- Encourage them, reminding them of their strengths and positive qualities.
- Help them brainstorm essay topics.
- Avoid writing, rewriting or heavily editing their essay.
- Make sure they have a system to track and meet deadlines.
- Consider limiting talk about colleges to one afternoon or evening a week.
- Help them practice admissions interviews with a knowledgeable adult.
- Seize on opportunities to teach them decision-making strategies.