

Professors' Guide

By Lynn F. Jacobs and Jeremy S. Hyman



Parents, Read This if Your Child Is Applying to College

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Holiday time is family time. And family time, in many families, is apply-to-college time. Many parents, despite their best intentions, do more harm than good to their collegebound children during this anxiety-ridden time. So we invited visiting blogger Marilee Jones, former dean of admissions at MIT and coauthor of the book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*, to offer some advice to parents of children caught up in the college application maze. Here are her eight "guiding principles":

1. Understand the college admissions process for what it is. Many parents think of college admissions as a competitive battle to be won. But, in truth, it is a key developmental phase to be experienced. This is your child's initiation into adulthood and, at the same time, an important moment in parenting. Your job now is to become your child's "grounding cord"—the calm and confident adult who keeps things safe as your child is exposed to the judgment and serendipity of college admissions officers.

[For more on the process, see the [Complete Guide to College Admissions](#).]

2. Realize it isn't happening to you. We are so connected to our children that we sometimes lose the boundaries between our own issues and theirs. You are not applying to college; your child is. Being clear about this affords you the distance to help him or her calm down when he or she is most scared. When your own anxiety spikes, walk away and firmly remind yourself that the college admission process is not happening to you.

3. Watch those pronouns! Think carefully about the messages you are sending your child. You may think it's OK to refer to your child's application as "our application." But chances are your child will hear something like, "You aren't mature enough to get into college on your own, so I have to help you." This is your child's initiation into adulthood. Your job is to lift your child up, not bring him or her down.

4. Keep your anxiety to yourself. Parents of college applicants have much to worry about, such as, "How can we afford this?" "What if my son or daughter gets rejected?" "How can I be old enough to have a child going to college?" While your worries are real, it's important that you do not share them with your child. Your fears will only amplify his or her own. Keeping a peaceful household is the goal now, so share your feelings with a trusted friend or peer. And if you're really at your wits' end and have no trusted friend, buy one: Now could be the perfect time to get professional short-term counseling.

5. Work with your team. Never act as your child's one and only adviser. The most effective parents team up with their child's guidance counselor and follow his or her lead. Even if that counselor is a 20- or 30-something, he or she still knows more about college admissions than you do.

6. Teach self-soothing. Sometimes we collect information because it helps us feel more in control. We ask our child such questions as "What did you get on that test last week?" or "How do your SAT scores compare with your classmates?" These questions imply judgment to our child, something that teachers, school administrators, college admissions officers, and peers might already be offering in large amounts. When your child is expressing anxiety, offer reassuring responses—"Don't worry, things always work out for you," "Everything is going to be OK," "It seems scary now, but better days are ahead."

7. Look for the grief—yours. It may surprise you to know that some of the upset you feel about the college application experience may actually be grief over your child's leaving home soon. Because grief is about loss, it's more comfortable for many people to turn it into another emotion that's easier to feel, such as anger. Rather than create more turmoil for you and your family, it is best to recognize the grief for what it is, feel it, and then move on.

8. Develop Plan B. It's not surprising that the main source of anxiety in the college admissions process comes from being unable to control the result. So here's a secret: In order to maintain an inner sense of calm, prepare yourself in advance for your worst case scenario—e.g., your child gets rejected or wait-listed everywhere—and work out a plan to deal with that. Then file the plan away somewhere and get back to focusing on success. Knowing that you have a backup plan in place will keep you more relaxed throughout the process so you can be that positive, steady influence for your child during the anxious moments ahead.