

Establish the Parents' Role Early

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Working with parents is one of the most challenging aspects of our job as independent educational consultants (IECs).

The parents we work with want to be involved but often need direction on their role in the process. I like to establish their role early, usually at the second meeting, and give them specific things they can do

to help. I also send out a monthly newsletter and calendar with reminders for specifically for them.

Parents of teenagers may already be feeling overwhelmed. Although they may not say it, they may have conflicting thoughts coupled with a feeling of panic that their teen will *never* get into college—or that he *will* get into college, leaving the family in financial ruin. It doesn't have to be that way. By sharing your knowledge with the parents and encouraging a little planning, you can help them make this busy journey a fun one to share with their teen.

At the outset, parents need to understand that the college planning process can actually help prepare their teenager for college and life after college. How? It is a great opportunity for their children to take control of their own lives by practicing skills in critical thinking, decision making, planning, and organization. Parents and other responsible adults can play a supporting role, but this is the student's college search. It is her life, his future. The student needs to be in charge—or she may end up not caring about what happens.

At the same time, today's teens are busier than ever and they need to continue to focus on their classes, grades, activities, and testing. So what can you suggest parents do to help without totally taking charge and getting in the way? Here are the five most important suggestions you can give to parents.

Be informed. This is a time when parents really do have to keep up with their teen's level of maturity and skill development. How responsible is their teen? How much help does he or

she need? What kind of college would be best? Parents' understanding of what their teen wants out of the college years is key. Parents should be informed about:

- Classes and grades
- Standardized tests
- College requirements
- Trends in college admissions (colleges have become much more selective).

Be realistic. Parents need to understand and believe in their teen's ability, but shouldn't set the bar too high or too low. They should compare their teen's GPA scores and test scores to the average range of what colleges accept, keeping in mind that highly selective colleges only take a fraction of students who have stellar grades and test scores. One of the worst things parents can do is take their teen on visits to colleges where he or she has little chance of being accepted. That just sets their teen up for failure by providing unrealistic expectations. They should also be up-front with their teen about costs and what they can afford. Remind parents, however, that they shouldn't eliminate any school because of cost until they have fully investigated financial aid and scholarship options. Finally, parents should make sure their teen applies to a range of schools, including at least two "likely" schools that their teen loves and they can afford.

Be supportive. Reassure parents that you have worked with a number of families with many different circumstances, and although they may not believe it now, everything will work out just fine. Encourage them and explain that there are some specific things they can do to support their teen and contribute to a favorable outcome. Along with arranging college visits, parents can help keep track of application requirements, be aware of deadlines, and oversee the financial aid process. Parents can also review and proof the applications, but stress that they should be careful not to "over edit" anything. Admissions counselors know the difference between the distinctive writing style of a 17-year-

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old and an overzealous parent. Supportive parents also help their teen find a balance between school, activities, and relaxation.

Know when to “butt out.” Encourage parents to keep an open mind and a tight lip in the beginning of the college search and application process. Tell them they may hear things like, “I am not going to college” or “I want to go to college in Hawaii and live on the beach” and then something completely different the next day. Let them know that it’s normal and they should listen, empathize, and understand that their teen’s plans will probably change many times during the process. Explain that their teen should make the initial contacts with the colleges and that they should fade into the background and let him be in charge when they visit the campus. Remind them not to horrify their teen by asking embarrassing questions or by going into the interview with her unless invited. It is also crucial that parents let their teen handle any issues that may arise with high school teachers and not intervene unless absolutely necessary.

Enjoy the process and keep a sense of humor. College planning and exploration can be one of the best times parents will spend with their teen. Encourage them not to ruin it by stressing out and nagging. Parents should plan the college visits carefully so that they can be

fun times to spend together. Advise them to familiarize themselves with the campus, set appointments ahead of time, know where the buildings are located that they are going to visit, and learn where to park. That way, their time on campus will run smoothly and they will avoid the frustration of getting lost and missing appointments. Parents should be flexible during their college visits as well. It’s okay for them to change the itinerary if things aren’t going as planned. Encourage parents to look for the humorous and fun parts of the process and to keep telling themselves and their teen that everything will work out in the end. Remind them to relax, have fun, and enjoy the journey.

Establishing the parents’ role right away will improve the process for everyone. Armed with a few simple tips, informed parents can replace the stress with positive opportunities to spend quality time with their teenagers, resulting in better outcomes and happier clients.

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