

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS: HELPING YOUR TEEN COPE**

The experience of stress during the college application process is inevitable – for both teens and their parents. Here are some guidelines to make this a positive experience – one where adolescents have a chance to learn and practice good coping skills that will be of benefit for the rest of their lives.

### **Stressful procedure for both teens and parents**

For teens, applying to college gives rise to natural anxieties: the process itself is long and involved, with a whirlwind of tasks, details, and deadlines, throughout which the teen feels pressured by others' evaluations and feelings of fierce competition. Moreover, "success" – in this case, acceptance to a school – is something of a double-edge sword in that it symbolizes the beginning of the end: of high school, familiar settings and friends, life in the family home, even adolescence itself.

For the same reasons, the process is stressful for parents too, since it is difficult to watch your adolescent facing such uncertainty and struggle. You also have increased responsibilities as you coordinate college visits, struggle with financial issues, and oversee other administrative aspects of the process. Moreover, you have to contend with your own, naturally ambivalent feelings about the upcoming changes when your child finally moves out of your home.

### **Positive learning experience**

But there's an upside; one of the great keys to a successful life is learning to see the advantages inherent in difficult situations. This is an ability you no doubt hope your child will acquire, and the college application process can be viewed as an excellent opportunity to practice the skill. Viewed this way, the college application process can be seen as a valuable learning experience that will pay off many times over as your teen traverses adulthood. For instance, the college application process is an excellent opportunity for your teen to learn how to organize and carry out a complicated project, maintain optimism in the face of uncertainty and stress, and appear poised during evaluative interviews – all crucial skills for any profession!

### **What can I do as a parent to help my teen cope *and* thrive during this process?**

- Sitting down with your teen during a calm moment before the process begins and asking: "How can I help you best?" With that, you open a dialogue and can negotiate whether s/he wants you to be:
  - hands-on throughout the process (e.g., helping him get organized, reminding him of deadlines, reviewing and critiquing his work),
  - or act as more of a safety net (e.g., involved only if your child explicitly asks you or is in very obvious need).
  
- Remain relentlessly calm and optimistic. It is especially important during this time not to let your child's anxiety become your own. Becoming over-involved, complaining about the process, screaming at a college counselor, doing work that the teen should really be completing on his own – all unequivocally reinforce for your child the notion that this is a negative, overwhelming process ("look, mom can't handle it either!").
  
- Be the voice of reason. Help your child to remember that there is NO such thing as the perfect school – all have their advantages and disadvantages, from "top choice" on down to "the safety". Reassure your child that you understand her anxiety, but *of course* she can get through this process – hundreds of

thousands of kids do it each year and she will be no different. Be ready to remind your child (with specific examples) of her past successes when she is feeling especially down – times when she wrote beautifully, successfully completed a difficult project, or presented herself well.

- ❑ Help your teen to see the fun and excitement that are just as much a part of this process as the anxiety and stress. Show him how to be excited about his endeavor by going out on a special shopping trip to buy all the supplies he will need to keep himself organized in the coming months (remember how much fun “back to school shopping” is each year?). Help him set up and decorate “Command Central,” the special place where he will complete most of the work involved in the applications. Acquire a large calendar that can be posted on the wall of his Command Central, and assist him in marking out deadlines and developing a list of what tasks will be completed when. These sorts of activities will help him to break down what can seem at first an overwhelming amount of work into a series of small, doable tasks. As an added incentive, schedule rewards for each major deadline he meets (e.g., dinners to celebrate when he completes his essays, planned “days off” when he has completed other specific tasks, etc.).
- ❑ Maintain your sense of humor. Laughter and good times together make any experience bearable. Gallows humor is nonetheless funny. If you can show your teen that you appreciate the humor and absurdities inherent in such a complicated and emotional process as applying to college, you are reminding him/her that the situation is not truly dangerous or beyond your ability to manage it together.

### **When to seek professional help**

While your teen’s anxiety around this issue may not constitute a diagnosable anxiety disorder and therefore may not warrant traditional psychotherapy, therapists nonetheless can work with your child on a short-term basis to help reduce the immediate distress, problem-solve, and achieve goals.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health**  
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