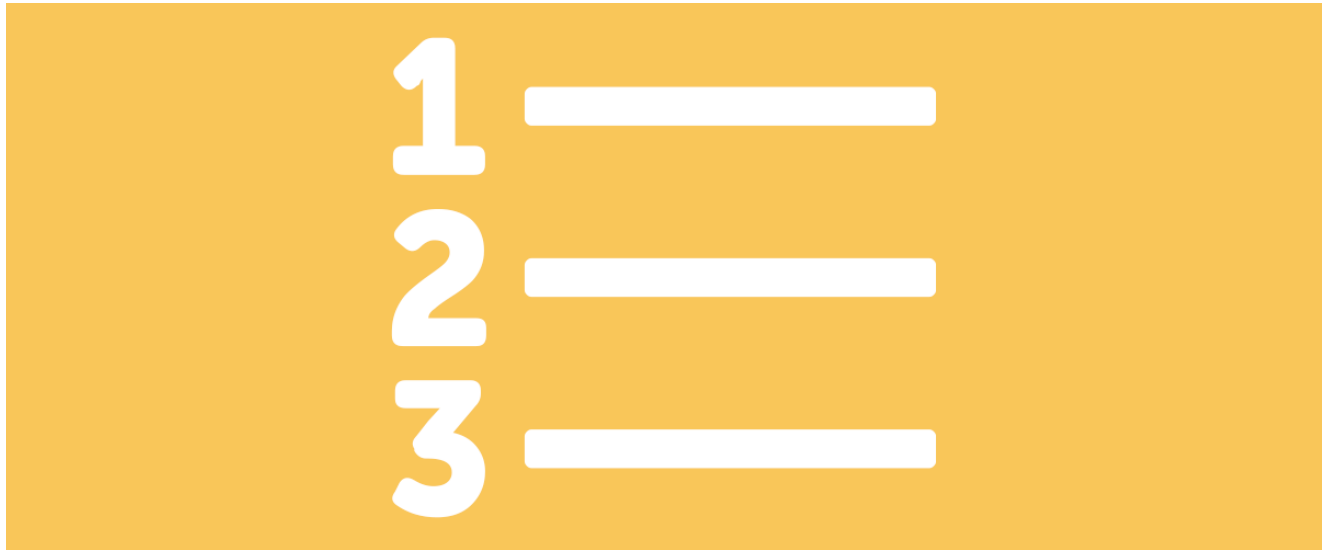


## Ethical Parenting in the College Admissions Process

[mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/ethical-parenting-in-the-college-admissions-process](https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/ethical-parenting-in-the-college-admissions-process)

March 17, 2019



**Parents and other primary caregivers shape their children's moral development in myriad ways. They also often influence every phase of the college preparation, search, and admissions process.**

**Yet the troubling reality is that a great many parents are fundamentally failing to prepare young people to be caring, ethical community members and citizens. That’s true in part because of the degree to which parents have elevated achievement and demoted concern for others as the primary goal of child-raising.**

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**In the following seven guideposts, we explore specifically how parents can guide their teen ethically, reduce excessive achievement pressure, and promote key ethical, social, and emotional capacities in teens in the college admissions process.**

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### **Overview**

For: Parents and Caregivers

Ages: High School

Resource Type: Guide

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## **1. Keep the focus on your teen.**

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### **Why?**

The college admissions process provides a wonderful opportunity for parents<sup>1</sup> to get to know their teens in a deeper way—to understand what they are drawn to, hope for, fret about, and value in others and themselves—and to help them articulate an authentic identity in a college application. It’s also an opportunity for us to model the empathy in our relationship with our teen that is so important for them to develop in their relationships. But our needs can get confused with our teens’ needs. We may, for example, tacitly pressure our teen to attend a college to live out our dreams, reproduce or own college experience, or elevate our own social status. How can we stay focused on what’s best for our teen?

### **Try this:**

1. Take time to listen. In the whipped-up, frenzied atmosphere of the college admissions process, we often need to just pause and listen and get feedback. We can ask: “How involved do you want me to be in this process and what can I do to be helpful to you?” “Will you tell me if I’m involved in ways that are making this process harder for you?”

2. Check your blind spots. Because we all have our blind spots, talk to respected and trusted friends and family about the areas where your own and your child's views about colleges conflict and about how to handle these conflicts.
3. Be alert to red flags. Be alert to moments when you may be confusing your interests with your teen's. It should be a red flag for us as parents if, for example, we find ourselves peppering admissions staff with questions on college tours while our teen stands idly by; constantly assessing what our child's school course and activity choices mean for their college applications; poring over commercial college rankings; or feeling our own self-esteem drop if our child is rejected at a particular college.
4. Reflect on your assumptions about "good" colleges. Reflect on how important it is to you that your teen goes to a particular college or set of colleges. You might imagine how you would feel if your teen isn't accepted. If you find yourself troubled by this prospect, consider why. What makes you believe that this college or set of colleges will be better for your teen? Do you have any data or evidence that supports that belief? Have you done research or encouraged your teen to do research on a wide range of colleges?

## **2. Follow your ethical GPS.**

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### **Why?**

The college admissions process often tests both parents' and teens' ethical character. A small fraction of parents are engaged in outright unethical practices, but many more parents slip into more subtle forms of dishonesty— their own thinking and voice intrudes on college essays, for example, or they might look the other way when hired tutors are over-involved. There's also good reason to believe that many teens lie or at least exaggerate on their college applications, and parents may either condone or half-consciously overlook these violations. According to several studies, a whopping 80-95 percent of high school students report some form of cheating in the last year, and many of these students view cheating as trivial.

We as parents need to toe the line on misrepresenting and cheating. We need to send the message that ethical standards can't be ignored if they're inconvenient and that success needs to be earned. Letting teens misrepresent themselves can also send the message to teens that there is something wrong with them: Why else, teens might ask themselves, would my parents write my essay or allow me to misrepresent myself?

### **Try this:**

1. Remember your priorities. Consider at every stage of the process whether getting into a particular college is really more important than compromising your teen's or your own integrity.

2. Ask for feedback. Talk to someone you really respect and trust about your involvement in your teen’s college application and ask for their honest feedback about whether you’re too involved.
3. Work through ethical dilemmas together. Ask your teen if they think cheating or misrepresenting themselves in a college application is okay. Consider the exceptional cases when dishonesty is warranted in the service of a higher principle—when it means, for example, protecting someone from harm—and discuss whether misrepresenting oneself to get into a college one prefers really qualifies as one of these cases.
4. Set a positive example. Talk to teens about why authenticity and honesty are critical—especially in this era of “fake news”—and about the necessity of acting in ways that will set a positive example for others.
5. Find out what motivates your teen. Explore with teens why they might feel pressured to cheat or misrepresent themselves—do they feel ashamed or fear shaming you?—and think through with them what role you might play in reducing that pressure.

### **3. Be authentic with your teen.**

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#### **Why?**

Many parents fail to have authentic, honest conversations with teens during the college admissions process about the inequalities in the system, the intense pressure in some communities to get into selective colleges, and about their own motivations and biases as parents. Some parents also send mixed messages. Teens report, for example, that their parents say that getting into a highly selective college doesn’t matter but then badger them about test scores and grades. A Boston parent acknowledges: “We tell our children one day that we just want them to go to a college where they’ll be happy and the next day we tell them they should go to the best college they can get in to.” When parents are not authentic and honest with their teens, it can make it harder for teens to express themselves authentically in their applications—and can undermine parents’ role as moral mentors and guides.

#### **Try this:**

1. Beware of mixed messages. Ask your teen if you’re sending mixed messages about where they should go to college. If so, what are those mixed messages? In addition, ask your teen what types of messages they’re receiving from their school and community about colleges and explain to your teen why your messages are the same or different from these messages.

2. Work through your irrational feelings. Consider sharing even your irrational feelings with your teen and talk through with someone you respect and trust how to share these feelings authentically. As parents, we may be underestimating what a relief it would be to our teens and how much it would support their maturity if we stopped dodging and shared even irrational feelings. For example, while it's important for parents to try to manage their disappointment when their teen is rejected at a college, if you're visibly disappointed in the presence of their teen, it might be very helpful to them if you explained why. You might explain, for example, that you always wanted to attend that college or that you were too caught up in the prestige of that college and that you recognize that these are your issues to work out.

#### **4. Encourage your teen to contribute to others.**

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##### **Why?**

High school students in middle and upper class communities can be caught up in a kind of “community service Olympics.” They believe they’ll get an edge in their application if they start an entirely new project, conduct service in a faraway country, or tackle a formidable problem. Yet these factors don’t determine the value of service; nor are these factors what’s prioritized by the 180+ admissions deans who endorsed *Turning the Tide*.

##### **Try this:**

1. Talk about your family’s moral anchor. Talk to your teen about why your family believes contributions to others are important, whether your views are rooted in religious beliefs, a commitment to equity and justice, or a family ethic that prioritizes our inherent responsibility to help those who are struggling.
2. Find out what’s meaningful to your teen. Take time to explore with your teen what kind of service or contribution to others is meaningful to them. Prompt your teen to think about many types of service and many ways of contributing to others.
3. Emphasize the value of “doing with” rather than “doing for.” Too often, service can be unintentionally patronizing to recipients and doesn’t develop in students a rich understanding of other perspectives or other cultures. You might explore with your teen opportunities for them to work in well-facilitated groups with other teens—either online or in person—from diverse backgrounds on common problems, such as bullying or harassment at school, an environmental problem, or an unsafe park. Especially given our bitterly fractured society, it’s also important for young people to work on common problems with those from different political and religious backgrounds.

4. Help your teen reflect on their experiences with service. Talk to your teen about their experiences when engaging in these activities. What are they learning? Are they finding their work gratifying? Do they feel helpful? What kinds of challenges are they facing? Brainstorm with your teen ways they might overcome obstacles.

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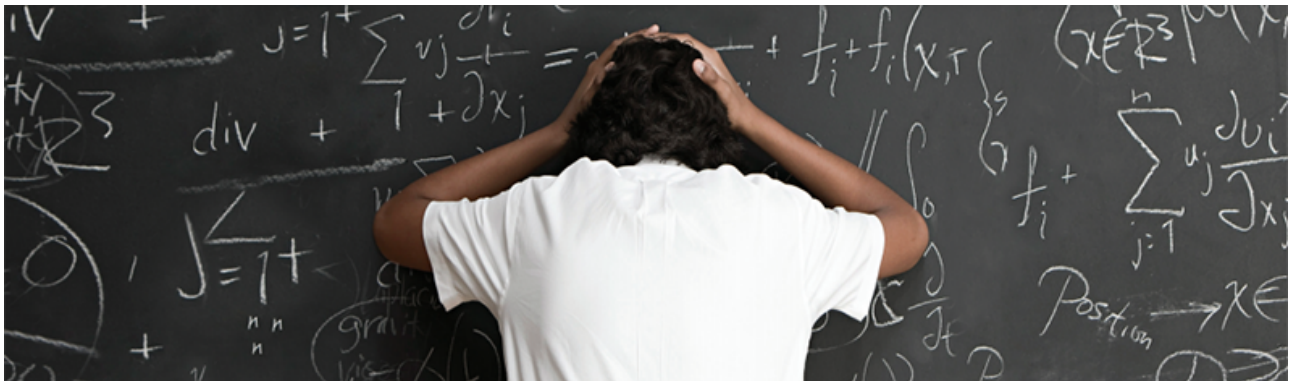
## Read the Related Reports

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### Turning the Tide II: How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Distress in The College Admissions Process

Mar 17, 2019



### Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions

Jan 20, 2016

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## 5. Be an advocate for ethical character in the college admissions experience.

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### Why?

When high schools and college admissions offices emphasize achievement and give little air time or thought to students' ethical character, they often argue that they are simply meeting demand, catering to what parents want. Yet too often all high school educators

and admissions officers hear are the loud parents clamoring for an intense focus on achievement. Our research as well as other research suggests that most parents, though, say they prioritize caring over achievement, and many parents in affluent communities are very concerned about achievement-related distress. It's vital for these parents to "walk the talk," stepping up and respectfully but firmly advancing a very different vision of high schools and the college admissions process.

**Try this:**

1. Ask about ethical character in admissions. In your contacts with college admissions officers during college visits and in other settings, ask whether caring for others and contributions to the community are weighed in the admissions process. If so, how much? How are they weighed?
2. Advocate for collaboration among students and families. Advocate at your teen's high school for changes that promote collaboration rather than competition among students. Advocate for creating opportunities for students to share information about colleges with peers and for parents to share information with each other. If you're a parent from a well-resourced community, advocate for sharing college admissions resources, including guidebooks, college planning tools, admissions-related curricula, contacts with admissions officers, and transportation for college tours with schools and districts with fewer resources.
3. Encourage high schools to share information about a wide range of colleges. To counter the intense focus on high-status colleges, a powerful driver of achievement-related distress, press high schools to expose students to a wide range of colleges and to refrain from touting the number of their students accepted at highly-selective colleges. Instead, encourage your teen's school to track and publicize the number of their alumni who report satisfaction and academic engagement at college. Advocate for a "blind" college fair where the characteristics of colleges are exhibited but their names are removed.
4. Urge high schools to limit advanced courses and extracurriculars. If students are overloading on advanced courses and extracurricular activities, advocate for limiting advanced courses and/or setting limits on the amount of time students devote to extracurricular activities.
5. Be an active participant in promoting character. Ask administrators what role you might play to support the school in promoting ethical character and reducing achievement-related distress.

6. Advocate for data. Ask schools to conduct simple surveys that provide data about how many students are suffering high levels of stress, and support schools in developing thoughtful plans and concrete strategies for reducing this stress and monitoring whether these plans are actually working.

## **6. Use the college admissions experience as an opportunity for ethical education.**

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### **Why?**

Far too often, the college admissions process is eyeopening for young people in all the wrong ways. It's a powerful introduction to the values of adult society, and many young people are morally troubled, sometimes deeply so, by what they experience. Many students across a wide range of communities are acutely aware that the deck is stacked, that there are vast differences in students' access to counselors, tutors, and other admissions resources, and that college is simply unaffordable for staggering numbers of families. Many students bridle at the unfairness of favoring certain students in admissions, such as donor and legacy students, full-pay students, and athletes. These perceptions can fuel young people's cynicism and self-interest. When students feel that the system is unfair or cheating them, they are also more likely to feel justified in exaggerating in their applications or manipulating the system in other ways.

### **Try this:**

1. Be honest about inequality. Explore with your teen the many inequities in this process. Why do they exist? What might be done to remedy them? How can one affect change? Analyze from various vantage points—including from the perspective of college admissions staff or financial aid officers—the case for and against favoring athletes and children of donors and legacies.
2. Imagine with your teen a fair system. Ask your teen to imagine an admissions process that they view as fair and high-integrity and to consider who and what needs to change for this system to exist.
3. Acknowledge the game. Consider talking directly with your teen about the reality that there is, in fact, a certain “game to be played” in this process, and discuss with them both how to play this game—presenting themselves in ways that are likely to be attractive to college admissions offices—while also presenting themselves authentically and accurately. It's a difficult skill that they are likely to need their entire lives.

## **7. Model and encourage gratitude.**

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### **Why?**



A good deal of research indicates that gratitude is vital to well-being and a key to young people becoming caring family and community members. Yet many teens and parents—because they’re anxious, self-focused, or entitled, among other reasons—never experience or express gratitude in this process. Any teen or parent of a teen who is applying to a four-year college that has a strong track record of graduating students should feel grateful for this tremendous opportunity—an opportunity that a great majority of people in the world simply don’t have and an opportunity that a staggering number of people in this country can’t afford. Only about 45% of Americans will attend a four-year college, and only about 60% of those students will graduate within five years. This broader moral lens can help teens and parents appreciate their advantages and consider the larger questions of justice that their advantages raise. Teens should also be expected to appreciate the many educators, counselors, and other adults—including parents themselves—who shepherded them to this point.

**Try this:**

1. Encourage gratitude. Consider with your teen what a privilege it is to attend any one of thousands of good four-year colleges in this country. Ask your teen to think about and to express gratitude to the many people who helped them prepare for college and get to this point. You might ask them to consider people who may not immediately come to their mind, whether a teacher, a friend, or a community adult.
2. Model gratitude. Consider who you might be grateful to, whether a teacher, a school counselor, or a friend who has calmed you down or offered thoughtful advice. Consider expressing your gratitude to these people and sharing with your teen your gratitude toward these people.

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