

List-Making and Loving The Child You Have

May 11, 2018



List-Making and Loving the Child You Have

Beth Slattery
Upper School Dean
Harvard Westlake School

When my son was in 7th grade, he placed into the highest-level math group. This was a source of great pride for me...until he failed the first three tests. I distinctly remember battling in my head: do I have him move down to a more appropriate level or do I keep him where he is and hope it gets better? I wish I could say I immediately moved him down, but I did not. He stuck it out the whole year, ending with a mercy B- and having no better understanding of algebra than he had 9 months earlier. Again, I was at a crossroads. This time, I chose the right path for my son. He repeated Algebra (meaning he was no longer in the highest-level math class) and regained his confidence in math.

This incident was about much more than math; it was about deciding to accept the child I had (one who simply didn't belong in the highest-level course) or spend time wishing he were different, wishing he was the kind of kid who DID belong in the highest-level course. This dilemma comes up all the time for parents at independent schools and is at its worst during the college process, especially as it is time to make "the list." How many times have kids said "My parents want me to apply to [name any school with a single digit admit rate]"?

I don't believe parents are intentionally trying to send the message that they are disappointed in their child when they suggest out-of-reach colleges. Most of them believe they are expressing confidence in their child's ability, but that isn't how the child hears it. The student hears that the parent is disappointed in the colleges that they can get into. The student hears that the parent wishes they were the kind of applicant who had a shot at that type of school. It also demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of "fit."

Not every student is a fit for those uber-selective schools. I often use the example of my son (the same one who took algebra twice). More than anything, that child wanted to play Division 1 baseball at a school that might make the College World Series. He also wanted it to be warm. That's it. Those were his criteria. Suggesting that my son look at Ivy League schools would have been nonsensical. In Columbia's application, they ask about books you've read for pleasure over the past year. If your child doesn't read for pleasure (as mine doesn't), that child SHOULD NOT APPLY TO COLUMBIA. Columbia is telling you what matters to them. Listen to what they are saying. If no one with your child's GPA has been admitted to a particularly selective institution, don't use magical realism to convince yourself they will be the one.

Be the parent who fully accepts the amazing gifts your child does possess. Be the parent who actively looks for colleges that match those gifts, regardless of where it is ranked. Be the parent who, when your child mentions a school you've never heard of, takes the time to find out more, rather than dismissing out-of-hand.

It can be tough to fully accept the child you have when they don't match up with your dreams for them. But trying to "fix" what is "wrong" with them only leads to alienation and anxiety. I chose a few years ago to stop trying to change my son and I now have a college freshman who is well-adjusted and calls home pretty frequently. I've proven to him that he can tell me about his successes and his failures, because I love him either way. So next time you are tempted to add a crazy school to your child's list, remember that loving them for who they are has a longer lasting-impact than any college they could attend.