

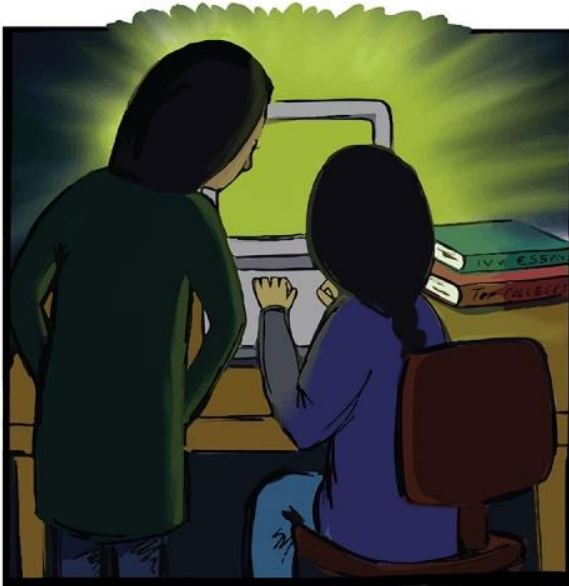
## RESEARCH STORIES

# Taming the Admissions Anxiety

How to parent through the college process — navigating hopes and expectations (yours and theirs) and the minefield of status and achievement pressure

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You're at a holiday gathering in your neighborhood, and the parents, once again, are talking college — exchanging the vitals on where their kids are applying, or where they've already gotten in. When one father beams about the highly selective schools his daughter is targeting, you don't immediately beam back. Your son is applying to some state schools and a few private colleges, but after a tough fall term, he's also thinking about working for a year and taking classes at the community college.

You look around and notice that the kids are standing nearby, soaking up the very different moods each parent is conveying.

## **The Weight of College Pressure**

In a highly competitive world, the college process feels fraught with pressure — for students and parents alike. For the vast majority of families in America, that pressure centers not on personal

achievement or the bragging rights of a selective college but on affordability, access, and equal opportunity. Only about 4 percent of U.S. students go to colleges that accept less than 25 percent of their applicants, and most American kids either don't attend or don't graduate from four-year colleges, says developmental psychologist [Richard Weissbourd](#), who studies the social and emotional lives of teens. The barriers confronting that majority need to be front and center in public conversations about college, he adds.

But a different and also serious problem is affecting students in middle- and upper-income communities, where debilitating academic and social pressure is fueling a public health crisis of anxiety in high-achieving schools and districts. [Some research has shown](#) that rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are higher among affluent teens than any other group of young people, and achievement pressure is a significant contributor. “But you can see this even without reading the research,” says Weissbourd. “You just need to spend some time in a high school where this is going on, and you can see how wound up kids are about college and where they're going to get in.”

*College admissions is an important rite of passage in America — a time for parents to engage their kids in deep conversations about their hopes and dreams, their values, and what kind of adults they imagine they'll be.*

All of which is too bad, he says, because the college admissions process is an important rite of passage for many in America. “It's a wonderful time for parents to really listen to their kids — to hear about their hopes, their values, their expectations for college, and to learn what kind of adults they imagine they'll be,” Weissbourd says.

With colleagues at his [Making Caring Common](#) project, Weissbourd produced a report last year called [Turning the Tide](#), seeking to tame the excesses of the college admissions process and reframe it to prioritize ethical and intellectual engagement, not just long brag sheets of accomplishments. More than 175 admissions deans have signed on to the report's recommendations. Some of those guidelines, and other advice Weissbourd offers, are summarized below.

## **Doing the Admissions Process Right**

- Listen to your child. Find out what she hopes for and expects from college.
- Be a guide and a facilitator, connecting your child to information and to big-picture thinking about the purpose of college.
- Put the focus on finding the right college for your child, not on applying to or getting into the “best” college.
- Unclutter your own anxieties; make sure you're hearing your child's wishes and considering her best interests, not filtering them through your own hopes, your peer-driven status worries, or your own unmet college expectations.
- Prioritize quality, not quantity, when it comes to extracurricular activities. Prioritize [service opportunities that your child finds meaningful](#).
- Make sure your kids are eating and sleeping well.
- Encourage your child to be authentic, truthful, and reflective in the application process.

- Make the process meaningful for you and your child: [use these conversation starters to talk to your teen](#).

## Confronting Status Concerns

Magazine rankings and other ratings systems fuel the idea that “one college is in some objective sense better than another college, or that there are 25 ‘best’ colleges in the country,” Weissbourd says. It’s a harmful idea, because “what you really want kids to be thinking about is not what’s the best college, but what’s the best college for them.” There are many hundreds of good colleges out there, and any one of them might be the right one for your child. Weissbourd encourages parents in high-achieving districts to visit some schools that aren’t highly selective, expanding everyone’s understanding of what a “good school” is.

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But status pressure is real, and kids experience it every day. “We have to have better conversations with kids about what status means and what it doesn’t mean, about the advantage of going to a high-status place and the disadvantages. We have to confront it more squarely,” he says. Students who go to a highly selective school may reap a reputational benefit or gain access to a strong alumni network, for example — but it’s also possible that the student body will be less diverse, or the campus culture more competitive and less nurturing. “As long as parents or students have this perception that there are 20 or 30 great colleges in this country, we’re going to have really stressed-out kids who are anxious about getting in. And many will end up feeling ashamed because they don’t,” Weissbourd says.

## Turn the Pressure Down . . .

What’s the “right” amount of pressure for parents to apply? It depends on the child, the family, and the community.

Some kids aren’t thinking about college at all, and in those cases, parents should start talking generally about the importance of college-going in about ninth grade, helping kids develop a college identity and a pathway for work and career.

Other kids start worrying about college way *too* early, starting with test-prep tutors in middle school. In high-pressure communities, “the conversation about the application process really shouldn’t begin until 11th grade,” Weissbourd says. For parents in these communities, he offers a quick list of “don’ts”:

- Don’t spend every dinner talking about college.
- Don’t arrange every family vacation in high school around a college visit.
- Don’t pop vocabulary cards at the dinner table to prepare for the SAT.
- When it comes to applications and test prep, don’t over-coach your child. Think twice before hiring outside tutors.

- Pause and reflect if you find yourself spending too much time worrying or thinking about your child's achievements.
- Discourage your child from overloading on AP and honors courses.

### **. . . And Get Real about the Source of the Pressure**

“Our data show that when you ask parents what’s most important to them in child rearing, they prioritize raising a caring child over a high-achieving child,” Weissbourd says. But when you ask them what they think other parents in their community prioritize, they say other parents prioritize achievement.

“So you have a large majority of parents thinking that the problem is a large majority of other parents, and that doesn’t square,” he says. “We need parents to realize that when it comes to achievement pressure, the problem isn’t ‘them,’ it’s ‘us.’”