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At Leisure Main

Beating College Stress

Movie night, anyone? New ways families alleviate high-school anxiety

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The school year is barely under way, but for many high-school seniors the pressure is already building. They're facing SAT retests in October, early-admission application deadlines in November and, in many families, battles with their parents over the high-stakes business of getting into college. The stress of college applications is now so well-documented that the dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology considers it a health risk for teenagers; she's meeting with a group of pediatricians to discuss ways of reducing kids' anxiety. Meanwhile, parents around the country are taking action to calm their kids -- and themselves.

Some are banning talk of college from the dinner table, having their kids take campus tours on their own to avoid family fights or adding movie and snack breaks to college-research sessions. They're spending \$15,000 or more for college coaches, watching creative-visualization tapes with their children and using high-school guidance counselors as much for therapy as for admissions advice. And still they're nervous.

Take Ham Clark. As head of the Episcopal Academy outside Philadelphia, he has seen plenty of college stress in his students and their parents. Now he's experiencing it himself for the first time as his twins start applying to college. He's trying to walk the line between helpful and hovering. He doesn't want to end up like the mother whose son wouldn't tell her which schools he liked. She even agreed to sign blank checks for application fees. (Her son is now safely ensconced at Swarthmore.)

Rules of Engagement

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After three decades spent advising parents, Mr. Clark knows intellectually why he should avoid taking over, but he still feels tempted. By the start of senior year, the twins had already come up with a three-word mantra: "Dad, just chill."

There are good reasons for students and their parents to be anxious during the jam-packed opening months of senior year.

THE PROBLEM: You encourage your son to say more about his accomplishments. He says no, that sounds like bragging.

THE EXPERT'S TAKE: Hector Martinez, a college counselor at the private Webb Schools in Claremont, Calif., says the best thing to do is ask a third party who won't be afraid to tell you how much is too much in an application. And, he warns, never contact the college on your child's behalf.

THE PROBLEM: Your daughter has her heart set on Yale and won't apply anywhere else. When you suggest she apply to a safety school, she retorts, "Why are you selling me short?"

THE EXPERT'S TAKE: Some high schools are abandoning phrases such as "safety school" because they are pejorative, but kids probably won't warm up to "a school with a different level of selectivity," either. David Harman, headmaster at Poly Prep Country Day School in Brooklyn, N.Y., urges students and parents to work with teachers to find the line between a realistic and an almost entirely unattainable goal. When students'

More and more kids are vying for the precious few early-admission spots at the nation's top schools. Last fall, Harvard, Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania all saw jumps in early applications -- and none admitted more students early. Harvard, in fact, admitted fewer than usual.

Ellen Broder says her son, Evin, a senior at Roslyn High School in Roslyn Heights, N.Y., hasn't applied anywhere yet, but already they're arguing over whether he is working hard enough on the process. The discussions are really about deeper issues -- respect for her, independence for him -- but the result is the same: silent dinners, reproachful looks, scolding and recriminations. "I have to remind him that I'm the parent," Ms. Broder says, "and he still needs to still listen." The arguments often end with her revoking her son's driving privileges. She may hire a college coach; she figures an outsider's nagging is more palatable than a parent's. She's even wondering whether she should shuffle SAT vocabulary cards in with the regular deck on Evin's poker nights.

To rein in her own worries, she's planning date nights with her husband and offering her son concrete help: a chart to keep track of different colleges' requirements and a calendar to record application deadlines. As for Evin, he says he'll meet his deadlines in his own way. For now, he says, he's trying to put the occasional family fight in perspective.

Some parents are simply taking themselves out of the college equation. "I'm turning the whole process over to my husband because I'm afraid I'll destroy my relationship with my daughter," says the MIT admissions dean, Marilee Jones, the mother of a high-school senior. Ms. Jones is afraid she'll push for an application with the hooks admissions deans want instead of a more honest reflection of how her daughter sees herself. Her husband's distance from the subject, she says, will keep him from micromanaging. "I'll want to sweep in and save the day for her," she says, "but that's exactly the wrong thing to do."

Parents who remain involved need to find a way to vent. The experts recommend doing it out of earshot of the kids. At the Lovett School, a private high school in Atlanta, a group of parents met last week at a session called College Applications and Letting Go. Janet Franzoni, the psychologist who spoke at that meeting, tells parents to listen to relaxation tapes 10 minutes a day for two weeks. If the tapes don't work, there are always new books, like this winter's "Getting in Without Freaking Out" by Arlene Matthews.

Some parents try the college-infotainment route. Carolyn Lawrence bought about 10 videos from collegiatechoice.com that show campuses, dorm rooms and dining halls. She and her daughter Amanda munch popcorn and soak up the ambiance from the comfort of their living room in Jamul, Calif. "With some

expectations are unwise, parents must face up to some tough conversations. Sound advice, Mr. Harman says, "might help ward off some pain on the other end."

THE PROBLEM: You are so stressed about your son's college deadlines and the possibility that he will be rejected that you are taking it out on him.

THE EXPERT'S TAKE: Talk to other parents. Web sites such as College Confidential and the Princeton Review offer parents-only discussion groups. Dan Lundquist, the dean of admissions at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., suggests that you and your child visit campuses together but take separate tours. That way you can ask all the questions you want without embarrassing or overshadowing your son. (And, should discouraging news come next spring, Mr. Lundquist notes that angry parents who show up in his office waving rejection letters rarely leave with what they want.)

of the videos, something would turn her off within the first five minutes," Ms. Lawrence says of her daughter. "She didn't want a school where girls carried designer pocketbooks."

Other parents are cutting out the college tour. Last summer, when his classmates were visiting colleges and listening to grim acceptance odds from admissions offices before the start of senior year, Southern California teenager Sean Minor was riding Sea-Doos in the Bahamas. His parents, Rickey and Karen Minor, thought he'd make the best decisions about college if he felt relaxed, so they all flew to the Atlantis hotel instead of touring campuses. "We always went with the attitude that we're going to take it in stride," says his dad, a music director for "American Idol." Sean, 18 years old, is in his first year at the University of Southern California, one of eight schools that gave him the nod.

As for Nikki Bollerman, a senior at Ridgefield High School in Connecticut, she has tried to stay calm during the application process. She says relying on her family has been her best stress reliever -- that and buying self-sealing envelopes for the recommendations she'll ask her teachers to do. "I went out of my way to be helpful," she says. "I want them to write the nicest letters possible."

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