

How to Talk to Your Parents About College

In the summer of 1993, I was nervous about telling my parents I didn't really like organized team sports, particularly soccer, and wanted to switch to cross country running. I was surprised and relieved when I sheepishly raised the issue with my dad, and he told me he was eager to help me move on to something new.

As a long-time college admission officer and high school college counselor, I have often reflected on that conversation, and I believe that one of the biggest problems teenagers and their parents face as they navigate the college process is lack of communication. Whether you are close to your parents or not, keeping them informed about your hopes and fears, the details of your college process, and how they can support you is imperative. Nine times out of 10, the most aggressive "helicopter parent" behavior in the college process stems from lack of communication between a student and their parents. Sometimes, when parents sense their child is not taking the reins of the process, they panic and try to control a process that should only be controlled by one person: the one who will be attending college in the first place.

One strategy to help ensure a less stressful college process and, ultimately, to feel pride and ownership of the final outcome, is simply to talk to your parents. Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind:

1. Ask yourself why you are applying to college in the first place. Do you want to go to college? Why? If you want to be able to communicate successfully not only with your parents but with colleges, you'd better ask yourself this question first. You need to be able to articulate the reasons why continuing on to college is the right thing for you. Don't do it because you think your parents expect it. Until you have a conversation with them and tell them what you think your plan (or lack of a plan) may be, they may just assume it's what you want. You might take their assumption as implied pressure if you don't have a forthright chat with them at the outset.

2. Take ownership of your college process. It can be mighty easy to let your parents take over the details of what schools you will visit, where you will apply and where you will ultimately go if you don't feel ready to think about those things for yourself. Take advantage of the many great resources that can help you quickly determine if a school should be on your list. Resources like *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, Unigo.com and college websites can help you gather information and begin to develop your own, independent opinion about a school. Then, talk to your parents about organizing some college visits and take initiative when it comes to planning; call to reserve a spot on a tour, schedule your own interviews, etc.

3. Your parents don't necessarily expect you to attend their alma mater. Your parents might only be suggesting that you apply to their alma mater because they want you to be happy and they know how happy their college years were. They might not be aware that their alma mater, which accepted half of the students who applied in the 1980s, now only admits 13 percent of the students who apply each year. Perhaps your parents didn't attend college or just feel they can't confidently give you advice beyond their own dated

experience. If they need a little updated information, point them to your counselor or an admission officer who will be happy to help educate them on the current state of college admission.

4. Don't shy away from difficult conversations. Are you afraid to ask your parents if you will need to apply for financial aid? Given soaring tuition rates and the current state of our economy, discussing financial aid and your family's budgetary concerns with your parents has never been more important. Are your parents pushing you to show them your college essay, but you are hesitant to share it? Graciously let your parents know that you have others reading your essay and you would rather not show them the essay. Consider challenging yourself to share the essay with them on your own terms to confront a sensitive topic. It could possibly spark a meaningful conversation.

5. Don't be afraid to fail. Oftentimes, I work with students who don't want to apply to a school that they love for fear that they won't be admitted. While balance and thoughtfulness are necessary when crafting a college list that is responsible and exciting, this is your one chance to go after a dream. Discuss with your parents your fear of not getting in somewhere and perhaps you'll see that their greatest ambition for you, at its core, is to be happy. If you feel confident that not getting into a school won't disappoint your parents, perhaps you'll feel confident throwing caution to the wind and applying to a school that is a big reach (while, of course, applying to a responsible set of colleges in addition).

6. Define success on your terms. Determine what success means to you. It might be something as simple as happiness, which can come from any number of things: a healthy family, a job helping others or a position that gives you the flexibility to pursue a fiscally risky passion. The point is to define success for yourself. It's easy to let your parents' definition of success become your own perception of it, as you've grown up in a house shaped by their moral code. Now, on the precipice of your independence, it is time to articulate and identify your own moral code, and talking with your parents is a wonderful way to test your ideas and to make sure they are aware of your hopes and dreams.

7. Talk to your parents about how to talk to you. At the end of the day, most parents want what is best for their kids. The approach they take to meet that goal sometimes will create stress, so help them out. Suggest that they ask how you are doing without referring to the college process from time to time. Remind your parents that the best way they can support you is by simply doing what we always hope our parents will do: love us, listen to us and be there for us when we need them. Your parents' responsibility is to strike a balance between sharing your dreams and helping you understand the reality of this process. It's not an easy job but, hey, they signed up for it.

Taking a risk and starting a conversation with your parents about your future might open doors that lead to a closer relationship with them—and a future defined more by you than anyone else.

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