

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF VISITING COLLEGES WITH YOUR KIDS

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Junior year, you don't know whether to laugh because you've entered the home stretch of the college process, or cry because you've entered the home stretch of the college process. Your "baby" is really beginning to fly the coop. If you didn't have enough to worry about with the continual push for grades and schlepping your kids from one activity to the next, now you have SAT prep, and driving lessons to add to the family's already overcrowded schedule. Your child's very definite ideas about what (s)he wants to do and where (s)he wants to do it keeps your hair colorist very happy. "Mom, please let me go to Carnegie Mellon. I can take the math classes you want me to take and major in bag piping. How cool is that? You want me to be happy, right?"

Truth is, we all want our children to be happy, but happiness is often found in unexpected places. With a bit of advanced planning, embarking on a week of college visits with your moody teenager can become a most cherished memory for both of you. The key is in knowing how much you and your child can process together. That will determine how many colleges you should see in a day. My daughter and I work well together and therefore, we visited the all but four schools on her college list during spring vacation week. We visited two colleges a day and on one day we even saw three colleges. My son and I, a bit more from the oil and water variety, could only manage one college a day. I visited the same number of colleges with both of my children, but needless to say, my son and I did it over a much longer time period.

The primary purpose of a college visit is to determine whether or not the college should remain a contender on your list. Last year, I met a student who informed me that he was going to go to Northwestern, sight unseen. Academically it was an excellent choice. Since his family was going to a wedding in Chicago, he agreed to humor me and "stop by" while he was in the neighborhood. He was ashen upon his return saying that he knew that Chicago was "the windy city", but WINDY and COLD in October!!! He's now at Emory.

Here are a few tips for your college visits:

- In terms of learning about a college, there is no substitute for a college visit. This experience will help you determine what you are looking for in a college and what you like and dislike about certain colleges. It is best to visit when school is in session so that you can get a true sense of the types of students who attend. However, a visit in the summer is also helpful in getting a sense of a school. Read the literature carefully and begin to categorize the colleges realistically in terms of admission criteria, strength of academic majors and programs, campus environment, activities offered, and support services available.

- Concentrate your visits on one geographic region. If you need to or want to, you will have opportunities to visit colleges in other parts of the country. You are on a fact-finding mission. Therefore, get the facts. Is this college worth keeping on the list, or do you hit the delete button? Are you comfortable in this type of community (urban, suburban, rural)? Does this campus feel right? (You just know when you're on a campus if it is right for you or not.)
- Let the colleges know that you are coming. For many college tours and information sessions you do not need an appointment. However, colleges track your interest so let them know you are interested. It does not mean that you are obligated to them, but as your search continues, should you find that your interest in a school increases, every little bit counts. Think of it as the chicken soup rule: letting them know you are interested couldn't hurt.
- After the tour, spend some time in the campus center to get an unvarnished view of the college. Grab a cup of coffee with some students who are milling around and ask them about their experiences at the college. What do they like? What don't they like? Where else did they apply? (This will let you know if you are of the same academic caliber as students who attend this school. Also, it may give you other schools to investigate.) My last stop is always the bookstore where I buy a pennant and M&Ms. Usually there is a work-study student there and (s)he gives me another perspective of what it's like to be a student at that college.
- For students with LD/ADHD: Make an appointment to meet with a representative from the Office of Student Support Services to determine whether the college can provide the level of service needed for you (your child) to be successful. ADA law requires that all colleges must provide services. However, not every college provides the same level of services.
- When you are back in the car, write down your initial reaction to the school. Ask yourself, "Do I want to come back here tomorrow?" "Could I see myself spending four years here?" Remember, both parent(s) and child get a vote!
- Plugging into an ipod and texting friends is not just for the kids. It's a lifeline for adults too. The kids just can't believe that we do it so well.

Choosing a college is not what it was when I went to school in the 70s. Like so many of my peers, I chose a college from a book. The first time I stepped onto a college campus was the first day of school, when I arrived carrying two suitcases and my brand new Smith Corona electric typewriter. College is now a family

affair that, as with any life cycle event is anticipated with pride, relief, sadness, and joy. Nothing beats the experience of spending undivided, uninterrupted time with your kids. After all, when else are you going to feel nostalgic enough to tell them about driving from Cornell to Skidmore in a blinding snowstorm to see Billy Joel, (and by the way, do as I say, not as I do – did I really say that?!) as together you break into “Piano Man” at the top of your lungs.

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