

Parents, What's Your Preferred Cruising Altitude?

By Diane Cole

Do you hover low to the ground, micromanaging your collegebound kids from a helicopter pilot seat directly overhead?

Or, in contrast to so-called helicopter parents, do you assume your not-quite-yet-launched kids need so little oversight you become what parenting educator and author Michael Popkin calls a satellite parent? (Hint: Your kids complain you're so far in outer space not even the longest distance phone plan reaches you.)

Then again, you might think your chosen distance is just right--even if your kids (not to mention their high school guidance counselors and prospective college admissions officers) wildly disagree.

To identify an air zone both can share, take the following quiz. Then use our contract to model your own family pact of acceptable help and off-limits hindrance. It beats a chopper crash--or getting lost in space.

1. MEET THE PARENTS (COLLEGE-PREP VERSION):

Your high-schooler and the school guidance counselor set a meeting to discuss college possibilities. Because such decisions affect family dynamics (not to mention finances), the school has invited the parents, too. You:

A. Assume this means you're welcome to attend *every* meeting, then wonder why the guidance counselor isn't ecstatic when you announce where *we're* applying, even as you hand over a professionally assembled press kit for your kid (including resume and DVD) and your handpicked list of super elite universities. Haven't you just saved everybody a lot of work?

B. Blow off the appointment. "It's your education, not mine. If you're mature enough to go to college, you're mature enough to make decisions without me."

C. R.S.V.P. and listen like a fly on the wall. Voice opinions in moderation: The focus should be your child, not you.

ANSWER: The royal "we're applying" (A) sets off an automatic "you're flying too low for comfort" warning signal. Your child's applying, not you. But being totally hands off (B) risks shutting the door at a time your child needs to know you're available to talk through possibilities. To find a balance (C), Judy Hingle, director of professional development at the National Association for College Admission Counseling, suggests imagining you're looking for a job, and your family is advising *you*. "A light bulb should go on," she says, about the difference between helping and meddling, as well as between letting your child have space and sending the message you're just not into his future.

2. WELCOME TO REALITY (NOT THE TV VERSION):

Your high-schooler has identified schools whose programs fit her interests and whose admissions profile matches hers. You look at her list and:

A. Hit the roof. "Don't tell me you're not good enough for an Ivy!" you fume. "These schools aren't good enough for *you!*"

B. Shrug. "All those school brochures look the same to me."

C. Are impressed by a list that shows thoughtful self-evaluation, with a range of schools based not on high status but on interests and academic record.

ANSWER: Helicopter parents may fly low to the ground, but their expectations (A) can be overly high, while satellites (B) distance themselves from the application process. Says Popkin: "If you have a child who is self-motivated, that's one thing; but most kids need a certain amount" of parental involvement to explore evolving choices. A realistic parent (C) looks objectively at the student's academic record--including what it might look like through the lens of each school, suggests Holly Thompson, a Palo Alto, Calif., secondary school teacher and college parent who has also been a high school counselor and college admissions officer. "There's this myth if you do something to grab the attention of an admissions officer, it will help your child get in. Whereas it would probably be more useful to look at the statistics for that college and see" how it matches your child's record.

3. THE COLLEGE OF WHOSE DREAMS?

Time to visit campuses. Your role is to:

A. Plan the itinerary, cramming in as many schools as possible. At each campus, inundate the student guide (as well as the admissions officer at the info session) with questions you just know your son won't think to ask, meanwhile furiously taking mental notes so you can spell out pluses and minuses.

B. Beg off the trip; it would mean missing your weekend golf game.

C. Offer to go, but don't insist if he prefers doing it himself. If you do go, allow your son to tell you what he thinks before sharing your thoughts.

ANSWER: You'll get no extra credit (A) for monopolizing the tour guide but will probably succeed in embarrassing your child. And before talking up or trashing a school too much, remind yourself: "Who's going to college in September?" Still, visiting campuses as a family can be an opportunity to bond and just have fun together. So rather than excuse yourself (B), why not add a golf match to the mix? However you arrange the trip (C), let your kids do the talking, says Hingle. "You're the listener, the sounding board, not the decider."

4 COACHING 101 (TEST PREP VERSION)

It's junior year, the start of SAT/ACT season. Though it's still early in the year, you:

A. Worry. True, your child has taken test-prep courses since middle school, but is that enough? Should you hire a tutor? These tests are do-or-die!

B. Tune out. It's just another test.

C. Talk to your child about schools he's considering and the tests they require or recommend. Use that as a guide to discuss whether he needs, or wants, help preparing and what would work best.

ANSWER: For middle-schoolers and high school sophomores, pursuing interests is a better use of time than SAT review courses (A), parenting experts agree. But ignoring the tests (B) may not be realistic, given that most colleges require or recommend the SAT or ACT. Nonetheless, think about review courses (C) "only once you know what areas you need to strengthen, if at all," says Thompson. The only universal bottom line: Keep track of test registration deadlines!

5 ADVICE WITHOUT CONSENT: LET ME ASSAY YOUR ESSAY!

Application deadlines loom. Your daughter has completed the essay. Your job is to:

A. Rewrite it completely, according to what you think the college wants to hear: not that she's another aspiring theater major but a practical-minded future nursing home administrator!

B. Say "Finally!"

C. Offer congratulations--and ask if she'd like you to proofread.

ANSWER: Proofreading (C) is a fine idea, and some adult feedback is par for the course. So is breathing a sigh of relief (B)--just leave out the nonsupportive digs, OK? On the opposite extreme (A), "admissions officers can spot an essay written by a hired gun" from tone as well as content, says Katy Rinehart, who spent 14 years as an admissions officer at Hampshire College and is now director of college guidance at Moorestown (N.J.) Friends School. Case in point: The parents' intervention in the real-life case above (A) resulted in a rejection.

6. IF THE DEADLINES DON'T KILL YOU, WILL THE REJECTIONS?

It's April: Two target schools said yes and two reach schools said no, while your child's No. 1 choice offered a place on the wait list. Your reaction:

A. You can't let your child be disappointed like that! The school screwed up! You place calls to everyone on the wait-list school staff you can think of to lobby on your child's behalf.

B. "You didn't get in where you wanted? Get used to rejection, kid, this is life."

C. Help your child recognize that even though she may feel disappointed, she still has options, and life does go on.

ANSWER: The impulse to protect our children from pain (A) may be understandable, says Rinehart, but "I don't know of a single admissions decision that has been changed because of an angry parent call." What parents *can* do is present a model of how to handle disappointment: not with blame and outrage (A) or school of hard-knocks cynicism (B) but with a measured overview (C) of what happened and what comes next. Negative decisions may well seem arbitrary, says Rinehart, "but your kid will be in much better shape" if you help him see he "can still go off and have a good experience."

7. DOLLARS AND CENTS OR THE MONEY MIND MELD

And now comes news of each school's financial package--or lack thereof. You start crunching the numbers and declare:

A. "We can afford any of these schools. If we're paying, we choose the school--not your first choice but ours."

B. "Which school's cheapest? We have our beach house to keep up!"

C. "Let's look at the numbers together, so we can talk about the pros and cons of each school and each financial option."

ANSWER: "When seniors get to April and say their parents won't pay a school's tuition," says Thompson, "I think: Why didn't they have this conversation last fall?" Discussions should include budget parameters (B); who's paying (or not) for what (A); availability of scholarships or financial aid; and how location (near vs. far) affects transportation costs. That will make (C) part of an ongoing conversation that teaches your child about financial planning, family decision making, and fiscal responsibility.