

## How to Jumpstart the College Search--for Parents!

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**The time has come. Your son or daughter is that new-ish to driving age that also coincides with the college search process. (Talk about a stressful twofer!) Luckily, we talked with author J.D. Rothman ([The Neurotic Parent's Guide to College Admissions](#)) about what anxious parents can do to help their kids in the college search, plus dealing the alchemy that is Ivy League admissions. But reader beware: Rothman has a wit so sharp she shouldn't be allowed to run with it.**

When should parents start thinking about their child's college prospects? Before birth, Rothman says, and perhaps travel to another country for delivery to give their child dual citizenship. Okay, maybe you don't have to go that far, but, truly, you need to start early. Instill good habits and study skills while they're young. Like reading. They should be reading—and read to by parents—like fiends.

Perhaps most importantly, kids should be doing whatever they enjoy doing, Rothman says. They will learn from those experiences. And becoming a good student shouldn't work like a switch you flick on when college looms on the horizon; rather, students will benefit greatly from simply striving to be a standout student throughout their school years, developing good habits as they go.

### The college countdown

For a true “this is when you should ideally start the college search” date, 10<sup>th</sup> grade is probably okay, Rothman says. That motivation should really kick in around 11<sup>th</sup> grade, with brainstorming ideas for solid application essays, keeping track of activities, visiting college campuses, and other relevant things. Before 11<sup>th</sup> grade, it's unrealistic to expect your child to throw him or herself (or to throw yourself) wholly into the college search . . . unless you raised a wunderkind like that 10-year-old who graduated from college.

Visit colleges in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade—just get yourselves there. Formal tours or meeting up with older siblings and/or friends at college, even tooling around local campuses: it all helps students determine their basic wants and needs (size, location, athletic facilities, etc.).

### Finding the right school

“Look for the safety first,” Rothman recommends, as it's probably more work than finding the “dream schools,” and you and your student will benefit from getting them out of the way. Finding the safety is tricky, in part, because it's not just about finding any old school with a reliable admission rate; you're looking for schools where your child would also be *happy* if he or she attended. Stand on campus and ask your student about his or her gut reaction to the place. You'll want two to three schools, and state schools are a popular choice. As Rothman says, “Love thy safety.”

After the safeties, look for matches and reaches. Rothman says she hears about students who apply to all Ivies and one state school. It doesn't make sense, she says. There are thousands of schools out there. The chances of finding a school, even several, that fit your student—really fit—are actually quite good. So why paint yourself into a corner?

But what if those senior-year deadlines come and go with no reaches, no safeties, nothing on the horizon? “They're in trouble,” Rothman says. Then it's time to discuss what those children actually plan to do after high school. Pushing them into college probably won't work (or work well), but allowing them to live at home for one year—paying their way, at least partially—may give them the taste of the real world they need. Students may find that life without their happily matriculated friends around isn't so great after all.

And if all else fails, “buy your *Fiske Guide* and put it in the bathroom,” Rothman says. That literature will get read.

### **That something extra**

Ambitious students are taught to become “well rounded” through a litany of extracurricular activities, and parents may cart their unwilling children to every soccer camp, ballet lesson, and summer archaeology course they can find. Rothman’s take on extracurriculars? Don’t start your kid on a “common” instrument like the piano or a standard sport like soccer. At the very least, throw in the glockenspiel and see if they take to it. From an admission perspective, surfing is more interesting than soccer.

But in all seriousness, this doesn’t mean you need to seek out a unique hobby and forcefully hitch your student’s wagon to it, but it’s good to help him or her cultivate interests outside of the box. Interest in magic? Send her to magic camp. Loves following you around the kitchen? Help him build a gourmet lemonade and pastries stand. Some kids with natural inclinations spend their [summers](#) pursuing that interest at a camp or pre-college program. Again, it goes back to encouraging students to do what they actually enjoy.

Ask your student, “What can you teach?” Rothman says. They may help them hone in on the things they want to do. One of her sons tutored students in chess, coming up with the idea as a freshman in high school, offering his classes at the library. Also, don’t feel like you need to spend money on extracurriculars, she says. Local jobs and volunteering are great.

### **Ivy League dreams**

Things have changed just in the three years since her youngest son applied to college, Rothman says. Colleges, especially the uber-selective ones, look for unique students, those with an “angle.” They want a well-rounded freshman *class*, not just well-rounded students. “Colleges do like kids who pursue one passion,” she says.

But Rothman is quick to point out that those well-known, expensive schools are not necessarily better, and certainly not worth parents molding their children into the kind of applicant they think the Ivies want—not that they’d have much luck doing so anyway. “Perfect kids” are routinely rejected from the Ivies and their ilk, Rothman says. Plus, the Common Application has made it easier for students to apply, and they’re doing so in greater numbers. And more students equals lower admission rates, as the most in-demand students hog the acceptances!

Not so surprisingly, the parents of “perfect kids” often don’t understand why their students didn’t get in. “You have to realize it’s a crap shoot,” Rothman says. Admission is very much based on what the school needs that particular year, combined with their particular collection of applicants. Colleges want balance, and your student could be the “wrong kind of minority,” she says. “Please don’t make your kids feel bad about it” if they don’t get in.

Your child’s college search should be a fun bonding experience, not hair-graying turmoil, Rothman says. “You need to have a sense of humor about the whole process.” And at the end of the day, don’t forget your priorities: remembering that an Ivy League enrollment is not a parenting badge, reminding your child that brand name schools do not equal life or educational success, and maintaining a healthy relationship with your child.

*J.D. Rothman is the author of [The Neurotic Parent](#) blog and its companion book, [The Neurotic Parent’s Guide to College Admissions](#).*