

Melissa Glenn Haber, P'15, '19

"What to expect when you have very high expectations for your child"

It starts, as so much does, with a misunderstanding.

On the face, the words are innocuous. "How are the supplements going? How was the Physics test? Here's an article—or three or six—on how to answer questions at an interview. Do you want me to go over your essay again? Are you sure you should be watching TV now? Remember, senior year grades matter."

If we turn on the parent translator for the moment, we hear what's really being said: *Oh, my baby. Oh, my love. I adore you, child of my right hand, about to leave me. I will never again be able to banish the nightmares by my presence, to soothe away your hurts with a kiss. This, this, is all I can do for you, my own one, the center of my life, this, because I love you so much it hurts.*

But as we know, children are not equipped with a parent translator, and this is what they hear instead: *you can't do it. I don't trust you to do it. All those years I said I trusted you, those years were a lie. I don't believe in you; I believe only in the imprimatur of a college. Your life will be made or broken by these few months.*

I know that's what seniors hear, because I hear it all the time from students. And the worst part is I'm not sure they're so wrong to hear it that way—perhaps that is, a bit, what we are saying to our children. And it's making them anxious and miserable and cranky, and sucking all the joy out of the room and not doing a damn thing to get them into college.

After six years of teaching highly competitive high school students (which means knowing four years of graduates too) I've decided there is a way out of this self-imposed misery, but it's hard for kids to do it on their own. As has been true since the beginning, it requires that we be the adults—and in large part that means protecting our kids from our fears.

Personally, I think the most effective way is for us to confront our fears ourselves—to lean into the unpleasant possibilities, inhabit them, and imagine what the world will look like if the worst comes to worst. (And put it that way, if the *worst* we can imagine is that our kids go to school X, that our fears are other's wildest dreams.... But let us put aside that profound and obvious point for a moment.) Imagine that your child is rejected by all her favorite choices. Put aside her feelings for a moment, and examine yours. Do you love her just as you did before the rejection letter came? She might not know that—tell her. You might want to tell her that a lot, from now until... Well, until she stops needing it, which might be never. Lean back in. Has the assessment of strangers shaken your conviction that she SHOULD have been accepted, or do you still see her as the same talented, brilliant, worthy candidate you have loved and admired for all these years? Isn't she still going to be able to use all those gifts to thrive wherever she lands? If you feel that way, tell her! From conversations with dozens of seniors, I bet she doesn't know. (Now if you DON'T feel this way—if your love and admiration for your child is contingent upon being able to brag about where they're going to school—well, then... you might want to tell your disappointing offspring that the money spent on their education would be better devoted to something that will assure people admire your status in life, such as a Rolls Royce.)

But you have it wrong, you might say. I'm not saying I don't admire and love my child; I'm

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saying I want him to have the most choices, to be happiest.

Of course you do. But don't confuse getting into a high ranking college with being happy. Remember that the capacity to be happy is the gift of finding what is useful and beautiful in every situation. Happiness goes hand in hand with resilience—so if your goal is happiness (or even if it's secretly success), work on the skills that will matter wherever your kid will land, because the Ivy League degree doesn't matter if the kid can't handle stress (which doesn't go away, by the way, with college acceptance) or can't handle disappointment (which doesn't go away, by the way, with college acceptance) or can't make his or her own opportunities (which don't just appear, by the way, with college acceptance) or can't find joy in what they're doing. Acting like it matters where they go to college instead of who they are says exactly what these kids fear we're saying: *you* are worthless; the only thing that will save *your* worthless hide is a Harvard sweatshirt to cover the worthlessness.

You still have it wrong, you might say. It's not about status. I'm not saying they need a brand name—I just want them to be with other kids who are like them, so they will have the most fun when they get there and the most exciting professors.

But, I say, even when you say that, you're telling the kid she won't be happy except at a few places. Given that she *might* end up at one of those, and I can promise you that she fears she will, there's still a solution.

We have to be the adult here; as we've done since they were little, we need to hide our fears. We need to tell our kids that what matters is that they're going to college. We need to visit "likely" schools and talk them up, not as sloppy seconds, but as a place where our wonderful kids will be happy. In my opinion, we need to say it with more conviction than we feel because they may well end up at that school, and we make sure when they get there, it's a triumph and not a badge of failure. We need to say it with conviction so our kids can't add our worries to their own. We should speak with conviction—lie, even!—because as we list why your kid will be happy and thrive at any of these schools we may well discover that it's true. Your child *can* be happy there—it's college! Look at those classes! Look at that gym! Look at that library which though it might have millions fewer volumes than Widener library has millions more than any child will ever read!

Let us teach our children to make their own futures, using their fine brains and gumption and resourcefulness and creativity. Because when we stop and think about it, we know what the world looks to on the resume is what we *do* with our education, and not where we got it. Placing everything on college admissions is like thinking about the wedding but not the fifty years of marriage afterwards. Our children are not characters in a Victorian novel that ends with the engagement; our job is to help them write that meta story where they are the authors of their tale. Our last, and possibly hardest job is to tell them they're ready for it, wherever they go. Let's not undermine them, just at that final moment.