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# An Open Letter to Parents: Thoughts from an Admissions Director

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I hope this finds you well, and you are looking forward to your child attending one of the many great schools in the New York City area.

As you embark on this milestone experience for your family, I offer my perspective on the admissions process. Below are some thoughts, bits of advice, and even a confession or two. As a long-time member of the New York City independent school world, I believe I've learned a few things. I hope you find these thoughts useful.

## **Educate Yourself**

A likely first step in your school search is creating a list of prospective schools, which leads me to my first piece of advice: Listen to what your friends and neighbors have to say, but decide for yourself which schools appeal to you. Visit them. Take your cues from the people and environments at the schools themselves. Schools come in various flavors, and we all have differing tastes. Besides considering a school's program, take a look at the artwork, lighting, outdoor spaces. You will feel at home in some places more than others; I urge you to keep an open mind and trust your instincts.

As you are learning about schools, the schools are learning about you. Schools are looking for families who understand and embrace their philosophy and practices. This may be obvious, but do some research before you step foot into a place. Be sure you like the sounds of what you read on a school's website. You'll know what brought you there and so will the school. You'll be able to discern: Is what I see happening in the school the same as what's described in its literature?

Ask questions. Avoid asking about the small stuff that can ordinarily be found on a website, such as hours, tuition and deadlines. Go for deep, broad strokes instead. You may meet current parents, students, teachers and administrators, and I'm certain you'll have plenty of opportunities to ask questions like these: What do you like most about the school? What would you change? How has the school evolved in your time here? What brought you here and why do you stay? How have you grown as a member of this community? A parent recently posed this good question to me: What are the common pitfalls that new parents fall prey to? Schools hope that families are thinking hard about their choices.

Schools seek to shape community. They want to be what you want to find: a place where people grow together and can enjoy each other's company in the classrooms and hallways, at social events, in local coffee shops, and beyond. Lifelong friendships are born at schools. In my mind, a school with a diverse, engaging array of families brought together by a like-mindedness of values is the ideal. Try to be your most authentic self when you spend time in schools; chances for a good match will be all the more likely if you do.

### **Make Your Interest Known**

If you discover a genuine strong interest in a school and can articulate the reasons for it, let the school know. If you're not really interested, don't fake it. Being insincere is much like misleading a suitor. No one will be satisfied in the end if the match isn't right.

How do you appropriately make your interest known to a school? This is one of the questions parents ask most often. You can express your thoughts on the application form, although schools may require you to submit your application before you're able to visit. In that case, your interest is probably based on what you've read on websites or in guidebooks, or on word of mouth (remember your friends and neighbors?). Schools are aware of the learning curve, and they understand you're in the process of forming your opinions.

Be honest about what appeals to you, and what you're curious about. No, you shouldn't send a PowerPoint presentation of a day-in-the-life of your family. Yes, you should express your feelings in person during an interview. You should write a sincere letter (or two) as you become increasingly informed during the process, describing specifics of what you like about the school.

### **Nine Do's—and One Don't**

1. Don't work on your application like it's a doctoral thesis; concise, direct answers are typically preferred.
2. If a school requests it, provide a full-family photo with your application materials. Admissions people want to remember everyone and photographs are a critical crutch.
3. Give the school advance notice if you can't make scheduled appointments.
4. Stay off your cell phone during school visits.
5. Confirm whether admissions events include children. It can be tough for a school to accommodate young ones when they're not expected.
6. Be mindful of other members of your group tours; don't hijack the guide as if it's your own personal tour.
7. Represent. If yours is a two-parent family, both of you (when possible) should attend tours, open houses, interviews. It's a symbol of unified interest and a statement about your involvement as a family.
8. Imagine your child in the school's program and facilities. You may love the community and click with the mission statement, but also consider your child's style of learning when determining a school's fit.
9. Confirm birthday cut-off dates to be sure you and each school are on the same page about placement. Trust the schools on this; educators have vast experience with child development and have your child's best interests in mind.
10. Be flexible about program hours. Many parents assume an afternoon schedule won't work for their young child. Young ones often adapt easily to new routines, so don't rule out an afternoon placement.

## **Your Child's Visit**

I understand your child's visit can be a stressful part of the admissions process. That's natural; it's something you can't control. But rest assured: Schools know about young children, and let's assume they will all be generous and understanding. Educators know young children are wired to explore and experiment, they test behaviors, and they are unpredictable. We also know they are keen barometers of adults, especially their parents. If you can relax yourself (easier said than done), your child will likely relax and show his or her best self, too.

## **Sorting It All Out**

And then notification day arrives. You get the news.

If you are offered enrollment at the school you've been hoping for, by all means accept it on the spot. You are part of a far-reaching network of schools and families involved in this process. Holding off isn't fair to those on the waitlist, or to schools. Everyone wants families to land where they will be happy, and chances of success are best when decisions aren't drawn out unnecessarily.

And what if you are waitlisted at your number one school? I suggest you contact the school right away. Explain that you will not accept placement elsewhere until you learn conclusive information from it in particular. Ask for advice: Should we stay on the waitlist? What are our chances of getting offered a spot? Often admissions folks can guide you on how to proceed and thus move things forward for all. Out of respect for everyone involved, though, I strongly discourage you from telling more than one school it is your "top choice." Honesty and authenticity are paramount.

Unfortunately, this process can smack of picking teams for dodgeball or a job interview. You are wondering, will my child and my family be chosen? Such stress. Here's a secret. Schools experience the stress, too. Admissions directors often feel a strong and natural connection to families. I know I do. It's gratifying to me when feelings are mutual, contracts are signed, and the future

looks sunny. It's disappointing to me when offers are declined. I get excited and nervous during the notification phase of the admissions season. I compare it to the act of reading a good novel: As I reach the climactic final chapter, I always hope for a happy ending.

### **My Prediction for You**

Once you've landed at a school, I predict most everything will please you. I guarantee, though, some questions will pop up. You may downright disagree with a school decision or policy. This is the moment you will define yourself as a community member. Will you respectfully communicate directly with the school, or will you stew quietly at home? Will you erode the community with side conversations fueled by blame or hearsay? Through open, brave communication, I believe, understandings can be reached. I also believe it's the responsibility of all members of a community, especially at a school for children, to cherish and care for the common good. What better modeling can we do for our children?

From what I understand, there are more schools in New York than ever before. Parents have many options, and I'm positive, no matter how daunting it may seem at the outset, you will find a school you and your family will happily call home.

I wish you the best.

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