

STORY TO COLLEGE

50 strategies for families to **start early & survive** the college admissions crush

A free e-book for Parents of High Achieving Children

To learn more about how Story To College can help students get into their top choice colleges, visit www.storytocollege.com, email us at getstarted@storytocollege.com, or give us a call at (646) 503-4861.

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*The childhood shows the man,
As morning shows the day.*

John Milton, *Paradise Regained*

a note about this ebook

At Story To College we teach students how to use the tools of oral storytelling to find, shape and perform the stories of their own experience powerfully and successfully in college admission essays, job interviews, and all of life. We work with families in the college admission process, helping students gather up all that they have done and all that they want to do in the world to show colleges the difference they will make in a college community. Richard Rossi, founder of Parents of High Achieving Children, asked us what parents should do early in their children's lives to lay down habits of mind and spirit to nurture success in school, work and life in a world that is transforming continuously. This e-book is our answer to that question, based on the latest research in child development and neuroscience.

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early childhood

Some of our most powerful rituals and memories are formed before we are even aware of them. Here are some simple ways to fill your children's lives with activities that will prepare them for living and working in a world whose jobs and assumptions do not even exist today. Enjoy these precious early days together with your child!

1. Enjoy music and art together

No instruments are required to make music with your child – you can bang on pots and pans, along gates and grates when walking around – just for the fun of it. And museums: even the smallest local museum is filled with spark plugs to your child's curiosity – stuffed owls, hat collections, old maps. This is how they figure out what they want to know. Just listen; they will ask.

2. Practice breathing and meditation to reduce stress

There is a growing body of neuroscience research suggesting that people who meditate have different, more robust neural pathways than other people. It doesn't have to be anything fancy; just show your child how to take a few cleansing breaths when they are upset, or just sit quietly for a few minutes and let the day wash away before they close their eyes to sleep. You might try it yourself too. Here's [more info](#) from MIT.

3. Nurture your child's innate curiosity and love of learning

When your child asks you questions about the world, take those questions up and pursue them. It's not just the answer that matters, but your openness to your child's asking. Are you feeling too busy to savor your child's questioning? Hmm... what can you remove from your life to make room for that new person seeking sense in the world?

4. Exercise together

Ride a bike with your child, walk the dog, or take a class at the gym together. This is one of those places where your child will do what he or she sees you do, so it's a great time to re-start that exercise program you left behind in college! Could I make a plug for sports that are good for life – e.g. tennis – and where parents and children can play side by side for many years?

5. Encourage your child to keep a journal

In one study, nuns whose daily writing was rich and complex had [less dementia](#) than those whose writings were less involved. Even before children learn language you can encourage higher order thinking (HOT) by having them draw pictures. Later, keeping a journal teaches your child how to attend to the details of the day to day, to capture the wacky things people say and to reflect on everyday life.

middle school

Middle school can be tumultuous. For many students schoolwork becomes more challenging, social groups begin to form. Often children begin to specialize, focusing on one extracurricular activity at the expense of other things. Experts say it's important to keep your child expanding, to listen to your child and to provide clear guidelines and consistent discipline to guide his or her social and emotional learning.

6. What type of learner am I?

The sooner you can help your child figure out how he or she learns, the better. Is he or she an auditory learner, a visual learner, or an experiential learner? Once children understand how they access information and build their own ideas, they can adjust and optimize their learning environments to make situations work for them. Here's a [simple test](#) for your child.

7. What are my strengths and how can I expand them?

Children often experience their parents' criticism more fully than their praise: "I came home with all A's and one A-, and all my mom noticed was the A-." Leadership gurus suggest we should focus on identifying and nurturing our strengths instead of trying to fix our perceived weaknesses. Here's a book for your children to [find their unique combination of strengths](#).

8. What difference can I make today?

Middle school is a great time to begin taking on service and leadership roles. Perhaps your child can help an elderly or disabled neighbor with some basic errands or pet care. Or maybe you spend a Sunday morning in a local soup kitchen. Find out how your children want to make a difference and help them get started today.

9. Let them explore what they love

Continue to nurture your child's love of learning. Is there a hobby they have taken up, a subject in school that really excites them, some place in another state or on another continent they want to visit? By asking questions and supporting your child's unique interests, you are fostering study skills and nurturing intellectual independence.

10. Schedule recharge time

Everyone needs a break, and in our fast-paced world rest can be hard to come by. Make sure your children's allows enough sleep for their mental and physical health (that's 9+ hours for teenagers). You might also remind them that it's OK to take a day without work or scheduled activities – every now and again – to do nothing and just be.

ninth grade

The transition from middle school to high school is complicated, and it takes many children a year or two to get used to the increased pace and intensity of high school. That's why many colleges don't look as closely at ninth grade as the later years. Help your child get the strongest start possible, but also be open to signs of confusion and distress.

11. What is the best high school for me?

My three children went to three different high schools. When the time came, each had different strengths and wanted a different type of learning environment. What are the high school options in your community? Would your child benefit from a more specialized curriculum of some sort? Talk to your children about what they want to achieve in high school, and where that will be most possible.

12. What type of friend am I?

With all the emphasis on grades and tests and extracurricular activities, is your child taking time to nurture a circle of friends in and out of school? Do the friends that your child spends time with bring out the best in your child? Is your child being bullied or pushed in a dangerous direction? Your job is to help your child see these social dynamics for him or herself. Here's a [free downloadable](#) version of the bestselling *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk*.

13. How do I make decisions?

Perhaps the most important role parents can play in the lives of their teenage children is helping children learn how to make wiser decisions. We all know that you can't tell a teenager what to do; the minute you start pouring your wisdom into them, as if they are a waiting vessel, they dance away and whatever you are saying is left all over the floor. But if you sit quietly and listen, children will tell you what happened and what is real for them. In those moments, your job is just to listen and ask the questions that help them figure things out for themselves.

14. Mistakes are inevitable and part of the journey.

We all know that we learn very little from the days where everything goes right, and that the hard days are the crucible for life's learning and growth. And yet, increasingly, parents jump in to rescue their children from the inevitable mistakes and failures that are their opportunities for growth. [Here's a book](#) with a Jewish spin that takes a different approach.

15. Keep stretching in new directions

It's quite easy to narrow your focus in high school, to stick with the courses that are easy A's, the activities where you know you're good, the people who look and act like you. Nearly every expert in adolescent psychology – and most admissions officers – urge just the opposite: try new things, hard things, things that keep you fresh and curious and a novice in the game of life.

tenth grade

Our focus in tenth grade is developing habits of mind that lead to success in college. Your child may not need these habits to succeed in high school – not yet – but they will soon enough, and the students who arrive at college with these disciplines in place fare better both academically and socially. These basic learning tools make the road through high school smoother too.

16. Ask for help

When students have trouble in tough classes, their first impulse can be to work harder and tell no one. As soon as you realize your children are struggling, encourage them to seek help from classroom teachers, and use this as an opportunity to create and lead a study group. At some point your children may want or need additional tutoring, but first they should learn that asking for help is a sign of wisdom and maturity, and working collaboratively a vital skill in all professions.

17. Get organized

The best way to be more effective in school and life is to manage your workload, rather than letting it manage you. When students hit that point in high school where the only solution seems to be staying up all night, that's when it's time to take charge and organize their work and life! Here's [advice from the experts](#) about how to encourage organization.

18. Do the work that matters most first

Hand in hand with getting organized, encourage your child to prioritize and complete the most important tasks – not the easiest or most urgent ones or those that are the most fun or the most popular – first. If your child completes only one thing today, what should that be? When a child plans and organizes a big assignment when it's far off, the separate tasks to complete it fit more easily into their schedule. But fail to plan...

19. Plan for the summers too

Colleges are interested in how you spend your summer vacation. Below is a list of summer programs in just about every category from Shelley Krause of Rutgers Preparatory School in Somerset, New Jersey. You don't have to do anything fancy or expensive – a great summer job or in-depth local volunteer commitment or anything where they can dive in, give 100% and [learn new skills](#) is a fabulous opportunity.

20. Stay connected as a family

Perhaps the most important thing of all during the high school years is to keep up and strengthen your time together as a family – dinner, family vacations, and just “nothing time,” as my children call the times we go grocery shopping, clean up the piles around the house, or walk the dog.

eleventh grade *fall*

If you are the parent of a junior or senior in high school, I recommend you read the rest of this e-book and then turn it over to your child – because the most important thing you can do is follow their lead in the college admission process. If you jump in – making the list, planning the visits, asking the questions in information sessions – you will deprive your son or daughter of the opportunity to learn and lead through this process. It’s very tempting to jump in at this stage, but better to resist...

21. Visit a college or two before the rush begins

Maybe on Columbus Day or another break, visit a college or two close to your home or school. These don’t have to be colleges you are thinking about attending – at first, the idea is to get a broad view of what happens in college that’s different from high school, to start thinking about yourself in a college community. Even if you can’t visit in person, you can check out colleges online at www.campustours.com.

22. Plan daily and weekly

Junior year can often feel like a crush of tasks and deadlines. This is a great chance to ramp up your planning rituals to the next level by planning not only daily, but also weekly and even monthly. When it feels like you are too busy to take time for planning, that’s when you need it most! Check out [MindTools](#) for smart strategies.

23. Just say “no”

When planning your activities, it’s probably time to do fewer things and do them better. Nearly every college admissions brochure says the college is looking for a well-rounded class, not well-rounded individuals. Ask yourself “Which part of my college community will I lead? And am I doing all I can now to prepare myself?” It’s much better to go all out in one or two areas, then to dabble in a dozen.

24. Create a board of directors for your college search

I grimace when a high school student’s resume says she was “CFO” of the Student Government – it’s the same job that used to be called “Treasurer” and sounds silly and grandiose. But this is for real: think about 3-5 adults whose opinion you really value, who you can count on for unflinching advice around tough problems. Ask them if they will help you with your college and career search – I bet they say yes!

25. Let your child take the lead

If you are a parent and still reading this – remember, I recommended that you hand it off – please listen this time! And juniors – if your parent gave this e-book to you, maybe you want to thank them, or tell them what you’re up to and say, “You could really help me right now by...” You know they love you and want to help, so give them something to do that keeps you in the driver’s seat.

eleventh grade *spring*

Junior spring is one of those times in life no one would choose to return to. Because there are so many important things happening at once – courses, standardized tests, AP exams, plus all the end-of-year performances and playoffs – we recommend you go easy on yourself. That doesn't mean you shouldn't push yourself and aim for your personal best, but make sure to take time to care for yourself too.

26. Complete standardized tests

Figure out whether you are focusing on the SAT or the ACT by taking one free practice test of each. Plan and register for all the tests you need to take (for many colleges this includes SAT Subject Tests, as well as the SAT or ACT) and put them in your planner. Test prep improves most students' scores on the SAT or ACT. So, on your own or with a tutor or test prep program, take time to unlock the mysteries of these tests, take a few practice questions every week, and ensure you do the best you can. For free ACT and SAT strategy guides, check out www.revolutionprep.com.

27. Treat AP exams as college tests

Challenging yourself by taking AP exams in classes that cover AP level material – even if your school is not teaching towards AP exams – gives you a taste of college-level work. Develop the strategies college students use to prepare for finals: buy study guides that review the material, including sections not covered fully by your teacher; form a study group; create outlines; and like your SAT or ACT prep, chunk out a few hours each week to conquer your AP exams without breaking a sweat.

28. Test yourself, but care for yourself too

Junior year pushes most students to the limits of their coping mechanisms – over and over again! You are taking the most challenging courses you possibly can, studying for standardized tests, and mapping your college search. No wonder you sometimes feel overwhelmed or stressed out. Figure out what you need to perform at your best, and take responsibility for getting it: maybe that's a walk just before dark; maybe it's staying home to sleep when your friends go out. Know yourself, and make sure to care for yourself too. You can find lots of great tools [here](#).

29. Connect with your teachers

Your teachers want you to succeed, and provide study sessions and extra work for students who ask. While you're there for help perhaps ask where they went to college – or how did they decide where to go, and what did they learn from the process? And even, "What do you consider my academic strengths, and where do you see opportunities for me to do better?" And then really listen to what they have to say. These conversations will help you clarify which teachers you should ask to write letters of recommendation for your college applications next year.

30. Stay in the present

When life and work feel overwhelming – and even on the average days – psychologists recommend you focus on what is right in front of you, rather than worrying too much about past or future. If you've mapped out your work, and put not just the deadlines but also the work stages in your calendar, you can confidently work the plan daily and weekly. Make sure to schedule time to decompress and have fun too!

senior *summer*

Senior summer is a great time to pause, take stock of what you've done and where you're going, and begin to plan out your college process. The longer version of this section was written by my daughter and teacher, Eliana Kwartler (Andover '12) and can be found at 21daysofsummer.tumblr.com.

31. Make a list of your accomplishments

You've worked really hard, and you are about to enter the high school home stretch: senior year. Make a list of all the things you've accomplished this year and further back. Include the things that might not be obvious – like trying to make homemade ravioli or having a conversation with a homeless person. From these small personal triumphs mighty essays often flow!

32. Read new things

Whether you read them virtually or in print try out some new ideas this summer. Try getting the news from a few different sources, and compare how journalists shape the stories. Work the whole way through a book that annoys you or with which you disagree. Stretch yourself in new directions. College is all about trying many things, and choosing a few – try that out, see what happens, then write about it!

33. Visit colleges

Though the students aren't there – so the view you get is a bit stilted and superficial – summer is when most students visit colleges. Make the most of each visit by researching the school in advance – are there special programs you want to learn more about? Facilities for arts you want to visit? A coach or program director you'd like to meet? All of this takes planning and organizing – and it really doesn't look good if your parents make those planning calls and emails for you. This may not be in your comfort zone, but it's something you want to learn by doing it.

34. Make a reasonable list

Most people recommend that you apply to 10-12 colleges, 6 core schools, 2-3 reach schools, and 2-3 likely schools. Stuck in the same rut of a list as all your friends, create a profile on www.zinch.com and let great colleges find you!

35. What is your Story To College?

Make a list of your achievements, activities, and influences and see what they tell you about your aspirations, ambitions, and core attributes. What do the things you've done tell colleges about how you will contribute to their community? At www.storytocollege.com you'll find more tools to find, shape and perform the stories of your own experience in college admission essays and interviews.

36. Remember there's still time

Is there something you feel is missing from your story? Something you wish you were doing but are not? Make a new commitment this summer – perhaps take up a new instrument, or study something that's not required for school. In those moments when you pursue something for the love of it, you are creating the stuff that makes great college application essays – because those things you take on for yourself, whatever happens, make you a bigger, bolder person.

37. Think community

College is all about community. When you visit colleges ask yourself, “What is the community like? What will I learn, what will I contribute, and who might I become as a dedicated member of this community?” College is a chance to expand your commitments to the larger community as well. Need ideas of how to do that? [Service Nation](#) connects people of all ages to community service opportunities.

38. Activities resume

Your resume is one of the only other places, besides your essays, where you get the chance to define yourself on the Common App. This is where you list your work experience, summer activities, and other accomplishments.

Online resume help:

- [E-How's College Application Resume Homepage](#)
- [Top 12 Tips to Perfect Your College Application Resume](#)

39. Art or sports supplement

If you are an artist, athlete, or have another special talent, check the specific application requirements of each school. Some have supplements that require additional resumes, personal statements, and videos. Athletes make sure to [register and follow NCAA guidelines](#) if you are planning to play collegiate athletics.

40. Map out the fall

We always teach what we need to learn ourselves, and so I return to planning! Here's a web site that can help you pull all the details together for application season:

[CollegeData.com](#).

senior *fall*

This is it! Enjoy the ride, and always be learning (that's #49).

41. Connect with your guidance counselor

As early as you can – in the summer if possible – sit down with your guidance counselor and talk about your list of colleges, the achievements you want to see included in the reference letter, and any gaps in your record that need to be addressed. This is your counselors' busiest season, so help them out by being super organized and giving them what they need early.

42. Take big and new courses

Your senior year courses matter, including the grades, and colleges want to see that you are still committed to taking the most advanced courses your school offers and doing well in them. Many schools also offer senior electives, a great chance to try out some new things.

43. Financial aid prep

Here's another chance to flex your new organizational muscles! Talk honestly with your parents about what they can contribute to your college education, and make a chart of what you are likely to pay (that includes living expenses, books, etc) at each of the colleges you are applying to. Check out this list of the [10 most affordable colleges](#), and other sites that provide financial aid information and forms:

Fastweb.com

Finaid.org

FAFSA.ed.gov

44. Treat each college as a unique conversation

For each college you are applying to, think of the Common App + Supplements together as a cohesive package. How can you use all the questions, together, to connect with that college and show that you understand and value their unique approach, and that you will make a lasting impact as a member of their community? A great application is about you and about the college; show that there is a great fit.

45. Take advantage of interview opportunities

Some schools call interviews "optional," but you should take advantage of every interview opportunity you have – everything from informal meetings when admissions officers visit your school or community to student, alumni or on-campus interviews, where they are available. This is the best chance you have to present yourself as a person to the college – and great practice for all the interviews you will have the rest of your life!

46. If you have a strong first choice, apply there early

There are so many rounds and types of early it makes me dizzy – way too much to get into here! But you should definitely apply early – one of our students figured out a way to apply to only schools she could apply to early, so she'll know where she's going by December 31. We thought that was a genius stress-buster!

47. Lead every day

Make a point to continue trying new things throughout your senior year. Treat this year as a beginning, as well as an ending. And whatever you are doing, give it your best.

48. Keep your parents in the loop

There's a real temptation to check out at home and not tell your parents what's going on for your senior year. It's much easier all around if you can give them occasional updates.

49. Always be learning

Whatever happens, good or bad, during your senior year try to stay open to the learning available in each situation. You are not likely to get in everywhere you apply – few people do – so be open to what can be learned from disappointment and even defeat. When the road gets rocky, try to remember Rule #TWO: Things Work Out (just not usually the way you expect them to).

50. Be a friend

Your friends are likely to get into colleges you wanted and maybe didn't get into and vice versa. Are you ready for other people's triumphs and disappointments along with your own? That's sometimes the hardest part of all.

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