

Professional Etiquette:

Upgrading your teen's manners

More than likely your child's first words were "mama" or "dada." But the first words you taught your child were probably "please" and "thank you." Teaching manners that enabled your child to request and acknowledge gifts (or opportunities) was a definite priority. Now fifteen years later, you can help again with this very important skill. How teenagers present themselves on paper, in an interview, or even on a social networking site can have a huge impact on their college and professional opportunities.

The good news is that unlike some of the other aspects of college admissions, this topic is something you have probably experienced frequently since you became an adult. You have likely seen good and bad examples of other people's professional etiquette in your job, community service, and social activities. Maybe you have a colleague who shows up late for every appointment. Perhaps you receive an organization's newsletter that is filled with grammatical and spelling errors. Even if you don't participate on websites such as Facebook or Twitter, you have certainly heard the stories of someone writing a post that speaks poorly about his or her boss or job. These are the kinds of etiquette mistakes you can teach your teen to avoid.

There are three primary areas that are especially important in the college admissions process: interviews, written correspondence, and social networking websites. Here are some suggestions to help your teen improve his chances of college acceptance as he begins his college application process:

INTERVIEWS

Some colleges offer a personal interview. While your student might feel anxious about these interviews—who doesn't?—encourage him to think of them as the college's opportunity to put a face with a name. Interviews are a chance for a student to show who he is, to explain or give more information about the details in his application, and to ask questions about the university. As you help your teen prepare for his interview, think about your own experiences with interviews. Here are some of the most important etiquette rules to remember:

- Arrive on time.
- Dress professionally (business casual – no ripped jeans or wrinkled t-shirts.)
- Take out your gum and turn your cell phone OFF.
- Shake hands firmly and make eye contact.
- Sit when the interviewer offers you a seat. And no slouching!
- Speak in a confident voice. Not too soft.
- Avoid controversial topics and slang.

WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE

Watch or read the news, and you're bound to hear a story about how the digital age has made good communication a lost art. I'd argue that it isn't lost so much as it is changed. Today's students must manage emails, texts, tweets, blogs, résumés, cover letters and the occasional hand-written note. Remind your student to use the tools and techniques listed below to communicate effectively and professionally with colleges, and potential employers.

- Professional communication is just that—professional. Use formal greetings in the salutation (Mr., Ms., Dr., etc.) until you are told to do otherwise. Do not use “text messaging shorthand.”
- Make certain your grammar, spelling, and punctuation are impeccable. You look lazy and unprofessional if you don't take the time to edit your work before you send it.
- Re-read your writing before you send it. Make sure the tone is appropriate, the points are coherent, and that you haven't rambled on, and on, and on....
- When requesting a letter of recommendation, be mindful of the writer's time. Provide her with a written note that includes all important information for the letter: the address the letter is to be sent to, important facts about yourself, due dates, and reason(s) you want to attend this college or work at this job.
- Last, but never least, send thank you notes! Thank you notes show the recipient that you care. Send notes to writers of letters of recommendation, interviewers, admissions representatives from college fairs, and even alumni or students who gave a tour. Most people now accept that thank you notes can be sent in email form. You can make an even stronger impression with a hand-written note, but be sure to do so in a timely fashion. No matter the form, just make sure your notes are sincere and prompt!

SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

This last topic might be the newest area for you to consider, but by applying common sense, your teen can avoid some serious mistakes. Perhaps your own mother once told you that if you didn't want a teacher to read aloud what you were writing in a note, then you shouldn't write it down on paper. That maxim holds true with social media. Students today are so accustomed to posting photos and comments on forums seen by others that they don't always think about the potential disadvantages. As a parent, you can help your teen navigate this new world intelligently. Here are a few strategies you should encourage them to try:

- Suggest he start by “Googling” himself. He will quickly see what an admissions officer or potential employer might see.
- Teach him to use his privacy controls. He can manage what viewers of his page see.
- Remind him to review his pages often to make certain there isn't anything he wouldn't want an admissions officer to see: un-tag inappropriate photos, remove any photos that look like alcohol or drugs could be involved, delete comments that could be seen as derogatory, racist, or sexually explicit.
- Remember that social media involvement can be beneficial if used correctly. Show him how to use sites for networking, participating in like-minded groups (maybe he is interested in veterinarian science or computer programming, for example), and increasing his understanding of other cultures or current affairs.
- Help her set up a profile on LinkedIn, and then explore colleges, professions, and networking tools.

As you and your teen embark on the college admissions journey, it is helpful for you both to remember that colleges are looking for students who are prepared for the rigors of college life. Showing maturity—and manners—in their communications will give them a meaningful head-start in that quest.