

I've studied hundreds of highly successful kids: My No. 1 non-negotiable rule for raising resilient teens

[Jennifer Breheny Wallace, Contributor](#)



I've spent seven years studying achievement culture and interviewing hundreds of [high-performing kids and their families](#). One issue that comes up again and again for parents and teens is how much the high-stakes world of [college admissions](#) affects their relationships.

Amid a competitive, expensive and uncertain process, it's

easy to understand a parent's temptation to [micromanage every detail](#). But this can often lead to fights and resentment.

Having observed the strain that the college admissions arms race can have on family life, I have a [non-negotiable parenting rule](#): with my three teens, we don't talk about post-high school plans until the spring of their junior year.

Establish defined boundaries to protect your relationships

Once spring of junior year rolls around, we confine college conversations to an hour each weekend at a time our child chooses, usually Sunday afternoon. These boundaries keep the topic contained and our relationship from being consumed by it.

That one guardrail has been transformative. It stops the anxious parent drip — the constant stream of "Did you finish that supplement? Did you ask your teacher for a recommendation?" — from seeping into every car ride and family dinner.

Instead, my husband and I collect our questions and save them for Sunday, leaving the rest of the week open for all the other things my teenagers have on their minds.

We want to protect this time and provide space for their

developing selves, for interests and curiosities that aren't constantly filtered through the lens of what a college admissions officer might be looking for.

Of course, my kids know they can always talk to us. But by containing our anxious parenting questions, we're doing what we can to reduce the already immense pressure they might be feeling.

The risks of excessive pressure

Growing [research](#) finds that students in "high-achieving schools" (those with strong test scores, diverse extracurriculars, and graduates bound for top colleges) are now experiencing higher rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use compared with national norms.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [classified](#) youth in these high-achieving schools as an "at-risk group," alongside children living in poverty, in foster care, or with incarcerated parents.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reached a similar conclusion, identifying "excessive pressure to excel" as one of the top environmental threats to adolescent [wellness](#), right next to poverty and trauma.

It may sound counterintuitive to put kids who attend well-

resourced, high pressure schools in the same category as our country's most vulnerable youth. But the data show that both groups experience chronic, unrelenting stress that can undermine mental and physical health.

Show kids they are valued for who they are, not what they achieve

"[Mattering](#)," or the deep human need to feel valued and to add value, is a powerful protective factor for youth mental health.

Young people learn that they matter through the messages they receive at home. One of the most effective ways to do that is to make unconditional worth visible.

One mother I interviewed told me about a metaphor she used to demonstrate this. She held up a \$20 bill and asked her child how much it was worth. Then she wrinkled it, stepped on it, even dunked it in a glass of water. "Now how much is it worth?" she asked. The answer, of course, was the same.

Like that \$20 bill, our children's value doesn't diminish when they bomb a test, get cut from a team, or aren't invited to a party. Our job is to remind them that their worth will never change, no matter what.

Make your home a haven from the pressure

So much of parenting is spent getting through endless to-do lists that our kids don't always see the delight we take in being their parents. Try greeting them once a day the way the family dog does, with total joy.

Small, consistent reminders that our love isn't conditional can shift the entire atmosphere at home. They tell our kids that their value isn't tied to their performance.

In our family, this became the inspiration for the "one-hour-a-week" rule. It was one way to put mattering research into practice. It's our reminder that home should be the one place where you never have to prove your worth.

When kids aren't performing to earn our approval, they're free to pursue goals that actually mean something to them.

So this year, as my daughter goes through the admissions process herself, I'm holding firm to our Sunday rule. Because the relationship I'm building with my children matters far more than any acceptance letter ever could.

[Jennifer Breheny Wallace](#) is an award-winning journalist and author of the New York Times bestseller "[Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic — and What We](#)

[Can Do About It.](#)" *She lives in New York City with her husband and three teens. You can follow her on Instagram [@jenniferbrehenywallace](#).*

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