

Neurotic Parents Convene for College Talk

By Genevieve Anderson

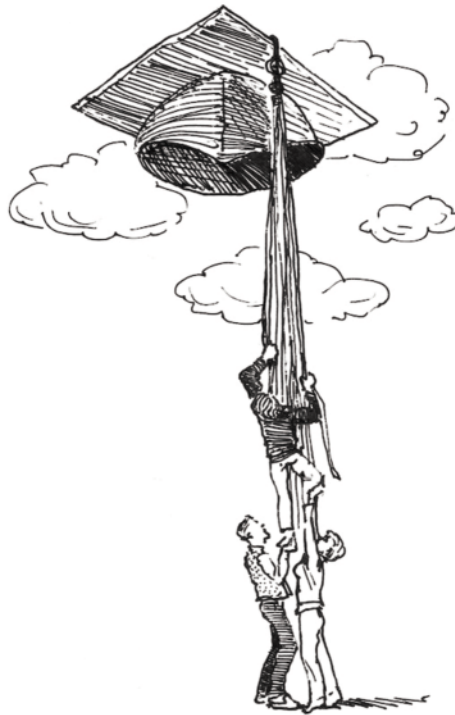
The packed theatre at Lick Wilmerding High School erupted in laughter when the speaker JD Rothman asked for a show of hands for how many 9th grade parents were in the audience. After all, the title of her talk that night, as well as her new book, was "The Neurotic Parent's Guide to College Admissions". Those neurotic 9th grade parents in the audience had been outed.

Rothman's literary agent had advised her not to bother speaking in northern California – "it's too chill" – and to forget San Francisco altogether since it was a non-neurotic city. She disagreed: a town sandwiched between two of the world's best universities, UC Berkeley and Stanford, would be bursting with college anxiety.

Rothman, an Emmy-award-winning screenwriter and best-selling author, herself confessed to humble academic beginnings: a bachelor's and a master's degree from a "top 100" college. After graduating, she embarked on a year long backpacking tour of Latin America and resettled in New York City to teach. It's when she landed a job as a temp and translator at the children's TV show Sesame Street that her illustrious career took off. Why does this matter in Rothman's view?

Because it's inconsequential where your kid ends up in school- anything wonderful can happen afterward.

Rothman joked that ever since she wrote a Huffington Post article titled "Why Your Brilliant Child Didn't Get Into the Ivies" she's been treated like an expert. Jokes aside, she is approached constantly by concerned parents, college counselors and admission officers alike. And for a good reason: Rothman offers the kind of advice that reassures parents that there are excellent, balanced, kind-hearted schools out there, and sane ways to get into them. She mentioned



some of her favorites: Kenyon, Northeastern, Bates, Colorado College, and University of Washington. These 'normal' schools are the kinds of places where you can still find students reading a poetry book under an oak tree.

She also told the (true) story of Dani, a girl who was advised by her college counselor not to apply to UC Berkeley because of a C she got her Junior year: she would "never get in". Dani applied anyway, and is happily studying there today. Rothman's prescription: don't believe everything your counselor tells you and aim high if you want to.

Some other appealing and amusing advice:

Find substitutes.

If your teen loves Brown but hasn't much of a chance, try Wesleyan instead. Love Georgetown? Try Boston College or Fordham University. How about U of Michigan? U of Washington is a perfect substitute. There are a lot of great schools catching up with the top tier, and offering everything they do except the insane acceptance rates.

Find a safety school to fall in love with.

Identifying a dream first-choice college is not difficult, but finding a safety your kid really loves is. Spend more time on this – it will make the whole application process much less stressful.

Avoid "Tufts Syndrome".

Tufts has long been considered the safety school to the Ivies. But beware: if you apply there and are a solid candidate for UPenn, you may be rejected simply because Tufts fears you'll be heading to Philadelphia instead of Medford. They could be wrong, and theirs is random thinking, however schools like Tufts are believed to guard their enrollment numbers fiercely. A number of other schools, like Washington University in St. Louis, have a reputation of practicing this kind of "yield protection".

Don't change your child's voice in the essays.

Parents sometimes do need to be taskmasters for their kids in the application process, particularly the boys. However, don't get so involved that you're editing the essential narrative of your kid's essays. Colleges can tell the difference between an 18-year-old voice and a 50-year-old one.

Pick some schools that appreciate Californians.

Do Californians have a leg-up at East Coast schools? Probably. "They like us because we're more mellow, we're smart but not insane, and we lead less stressful lives". Plus if your child applies to a school like Duke (aka University of New Jersey) she'll be considered more unusual, almost from "abroad".

Early Decision is a way of saying "I'll marry you if you ask".

The statistics speak for themselves: a higher percentage of applicants get in Early Decision than Regular Decision, often just 3 to 4 percentage points higher but this can make all the difference. Rothman is convinced that both her sons would never have been admitted to Duke had they dropped themselves into the regular admission pool.

Never despair, there are great schools abroad that are easier to get into.

If your child is worried about his prospects at home, but still wants a prestigious school, he should consider a few good places abroad. Very capable kids, not happy with their US choices, have gone in droves to universities like McGill, St. Andrews and Edinburgh. And they've acquired an education and a half for having ventured to new cultures.

The evening ended with a Q&A session and, as Rothman predicted, with parents treating her like an expert. While far from it, Rothman does give a refreshing and light-hearted view of a maddening, uniquely American process.

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Where's the Best Place to Study?

By Robina Riccitiello

As another school year is underway, students across San Francisco are well into this year's round of homework. Pencils sharpened (does anyone write on paper anymore?), laptops and iPads charged, snacks at hand ... they are ready to work. The question is where? Some students study at pristine desks in their rooms, with the door closed to familial distractions. Others sprawl on the living room couch, with the TV blaring, Facebook beckoning and younger siblings pestering. Is the sequestered student guaranteed to do better than the more distracted student? Not necessarily.

Education experts – and parents – have long suggested that students work every day in the same place, ideally in a quiet place with all their books and school supplies on their desks. But an oft-quoted 1978 study found that college students who studied a set of 40 words in two different rooms performed better on a recall test than students who practiced the words twice in the same room. In the study by researchers at University of Wisconsin, Madison, and UCLA, some of the students studied the words once in a cluttered, windowless room and once in a modern room with a view, while the others stuck to a single room. Working in different locations with difference sensory inputs may make the material “stick” better.

Several San Francisco parents reported that their teens already vary their study spots, but more often because of convenience and the desire for company than because they think it helps them learn better.

“My high schooler likes to study out in the open – in the kitchen, on the dining room table, in the living room, and yes, sometimes in front of the TV,” said the mother of a student at Jewish Community High School. “Since she does a good deal of her work on the computer, the pull of Facebook and YouTube is strong. But I also overhear video calls with her classmates when they’re completing assignments or going through study packets to prepare for exams.”

The mother of two graduates from Drew School recalled equipping her daughters’ rooms with desks, only to discover that they preferred studying on their beds ... or on the floor of the parents’ bedroom.

Students who work in the kitchen or other public areas of the house risk parental nagging and other distractions, but sometimes it’s worth having the company, parents said. “I have a junior girl who likes to alternate her homework station between her bedroom and the dining room. She gets lonely in her room and comes to the dining or kitchen area for company,” a mother of two students at Lick-Wilmerding High School noted. “However, she knows I will ask her to set aside her iPhone and generally nag her about Facebook and Snapchatting, so she sometimes sticks to her room. I love to have her in the kitchen and I realize ... I can’t nag her so much and ask her to focus.”

The same parent has a son who always works in his room. “He’s quite focused and gets his work done, but boy, can

he multitask,” she said. “He simultaneously works and Facebooks hard for hours at a stretch, which is probably why he prefers the quiet and privacy of his room.”

Another mother of two says her son, now away at college, used to work in the dining room. “Since he was generally nearby, I could kiss his head if I walked by,” she said. Her high school daughter usually works in her room at her desk or on her bed, which makes giving a passing kiss on the head a bit “awkward and intrusive,” she said. “I could ask her about doing some work more centrally and she might be touched by the request because of the reason – wanting to see her more – but I suspect there is a lot of intermittent communication – texting, Facebook, iChatting – that goes on and she does not want me to see any of that.”

Studies have shown that multitasking reduces the quality of learning. But few students can resist the draw of Facebook, Instagram and the countless other apps aimed at teens and young adults.

“The top 25 percent of Stanford students are using four or more media at one time when they’re using media,” Dr. Clifford Nass, a Stanford psychology professor, told NPR earlier this year. “So when they’re writing a paper, they’re also Facebooking, listening to music, texting, Twittering, et cetera.” Nass says research shows that people who multi-task regularly are “basically terrible at all sorts of cognitive tasks, including multitasking.”

A UCLA study showed that people who tried to learn a new task while distracted by a series of beeps did not learn as efficiently. Learning that takes place without distraction actively uses the hippocampus, which plays an important role in processing, storing and recalling information. Using MRIs of the study participants’ brains, the researchers discovered that the people who were distracted were using another part of the brain – the striatum – and not the hippocampus, in learning.

“Multi-tasking adversely affects how you learn” the co-author of the 2006 UCLA study, Russell Poldrack, said in a statement. Poldrack is now director of the Imaging Research Center at University of Texas at Austin. “Even if you learn by multi-tasking, that learning is less flexible and more specialized, so you cannot retrieve the information as easily.”

In fairness to multi-tasking teenagers worldwide, researchers have not yet focused on how the brain is stimulated while the students are doing something pleasurable, like listening to music, while learning. But a Kaiser Family Foundation study observed 8 to 18 year olds and found that during a 15 minute study session, most of them couldn’t resist multi-tasking. The study found that students spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day using entertainment media, but because they are multi-tasking, they actually see, on average, more than 10 hours’ worth of media content daily. Many teens find they have to turn off their social media and mobile phone to get any work done.

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Breaking Through Deadlocks

By Cynthia Klein

Imagine you are having a conflict with your child because he won't do his homework. You are in a deadlock because both of you are determined to win the argument. Your perspective is that it is his homework and he needs to be responsible for getting it done. You shouldn't have to nag him. He can do it if he would only try harder. This one-sided inflexible perspective builds walls which creates barriers to problem solving together.

I recently coached a couple who held the "We're right" position with their daughter who was struggling with homework. They judged her with "should" statements that caused her to pull away and not accept their help. They tried criticism, blaming and shaming to get her to "be responsible" without results. Examples of inflexible judgmental statements that they used are; "Why won't you let us help you?" "You could do it if you didn't spend so much time talking with your friends" and, "You say you want better grades, then why don't you try harder?"

Mary and Bob needed to adopt a more flexible ally perspective. Then, they could listen to each other and share responsibility for solving the homework dilemma. Their daughter had a gap between what she wanted to accomplish and what she was actually accomplishing. Children need their parents to step in and help them bridge this gap.

As we give up attempts at controlling our children, we can parent with compassion, wisdom and understanding.

Here are three steps for parents to take in order to break through the parent-child power struggle deadlock. It is crucial for the parent to shift from **inflexible** beliefs and actions to **flexible** beliefs and actions. First, eliminate all statements with "should" such as, "You should be able to do this." "Should" is dangerous because it is judgmental and disregards the child's perspective. Second, clearly state the facts of the situation without judgment. Third, discuss problem solving solutions based on reality rather than your expectations and fears.

Mary and Bob transformed some deep-rooted inflexible beliefs that were triggered by fears. They were afraid that their daughter might not succeed in school, not attend college and reduce her earning potential. Even though these fears may be valid, it is important to focus instead on staying in the moment and problem solve together. Here are examples of how Mary and Bob shifted their thinking.

Old should-based inflexible thinking: If she would only try harder, she would finish. These thoughts were replaced with:

New reality-based flexible thinking: She isn't able to do the homework even though she wants to. Maybe she really doesn't understand it.

Old should-based inflexible thinking: If she didn't rush through her work, she would do better. Why won't she let us help her? These thoughts were replaced with:

New reality-based flexible thinking: Maybe she doesn't want help because she is embarrassed that she doesn't understand. I have made it difficult for her to share her feelings. This breaks her trust in me.

Old should-based inflexible thinking: But I shouldn't have to help her so much. These thoughts were replaced with:

New reality-based flexible thinking: Apparently, she is not able to do the homework on her own. We need to help her bridge between her current limitations and her dreams. We'll tell her we realize it is difficult and we will work together to find solutions.

When Mary and Bob empathized with their daughter and shifted from being an adversary to an ally, the wall came down. They discovered that she didn't understand her math. She now accepts her mom's help and understands the assignments. Her grades have gone from failing to great!!

You may be thinking, "But my child knows how to do the work, he is just lazy." The same formula applies. Stop judgmental "should" statements. Clearly state the reality of the situation. Address your fears. Transform inflexible beliefs to flexible beliefs. Then be open to solve the problem together.

The parent leads by changing their beliefs and actions first. We steer our relationships with our children out of a deadlock by changing our inflexible thinking and actions to flexible thinking and actions. As we give up attempts at controlling our children, we can parent with compassion, wisdom and understanding.

Every deadlock is an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and our children. When you feel stuck, step back and self-reflect. Listen to your children today with an open mind and an open heart. With this approach, your family members will build bridges to understanding together and roads to happy and successful lives.

Cynthia Klein, Bridges 2 Understanding, has been a Certified Parent Educator since 1994. She works with parents and organizations who want more cooperation, mutual respect and understanding between adults and children of all ages. See more at www.bridges2understanding.com.

Where's the Best Place to Study *(continued from page 2)*

The biggest obstacle for my girls was the clutter of social media," said the mother of two Drew graduates. "They had to take themselves off-line to focus completely."

Some students change their study habits as high school progresses, moving from the couch or bed to their desks as the work becomes more demanding.

"My junior just started studying in his room with the door closed this year. It was his preference. We never talked about it. It just occurred naturally," one mother reported. "I miss him being so removed, but I am trying to respect his movements and need for separation. He tends to go immediately upstairs after school or rehearsal and I sense he just needs down time and time alone after so much contact with others."

Psychologists say that studying throughout the week, instead of cramming right before a test, works better for long-term learning. Routine tests or quizzes also help students learn the material better than just reviewing lecture notes and readings. A study of Washington University students found that those students who were tested during the course of the study retained the information better than those who studied the material for an equal length of time, but weren't tested.

"We believe that the neglect of testing in all levels of education is misguided," wrote the study's authors, Henry L. Roediger III and Jeffrey D. Karpicke. "... Testing has a powerful positive effect on future retention."

Students sometimes find creative ways to learn tough material.

"My daughter's best tool for memorization was making up raps," a high school mom recalled. "She had us in hysterics sometimes, especially her rap on the digestive system, which she recited marching around the house in her robe."

Riccitiello, a San Francisco freelance journalist, is the mother of two daughters and the Chair of the Parents' Coalition of Bay Area High Schools.



Parents Coalition
of Bay Area High Schools

Upcoming PCOBASHS Events

Feb. 3, 2014

**Being the Rare Adult Teens
Listen To with Jeff Leiken**

Jeff Leiken, a Bay Area professional mentor, is known for his honest, accurate, unapologetic message about what it takes to help today's youth thrive. Leiken's genuine passion for his work, his depth of knowledge, his captivating storytelling and his warm sense of humor, make him a sought-after speaker. Leiken uses practical examples and advice to open up new ways of talking and dealing with your teen.

March 24, 2014

Annual Teen Panel Discussion

A panel of students from Bay Area high schools will tell you what teens are talking about and concerned about. They will share their insights with parents What are they worried about? What do parents do that they welcome? What do parents do that annoys them? What kind of support do they need from parents? These are just a few of the topics that may come up at this enlightening evening of teen opinion and discussion.

Martha Rock will moderate the panel.

**Learn more at www.parentscoalition.net
www.facebook.com/ParentsCoalitionBayArea**

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**"To support, educate,
and inspire parents of
adolescents in order to
promote the health and
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