

# COLLEGE PREP-101

## Early College Preparation

I'm often asked what parents of young children can do to help their kids be ready for college. While most of my writing is for high schoolers and their parents, I do have a suggestion or two to contribute to that discussion.

In my mind, the most important thing you can do toward this end is to make college a part of their life, one of your expectations, and something they learn about, talk about and hear about throughout their young life. When it's summer they will go swimming, when it's Halloween they will go trick-or-treating, and when they're finished with high school they will go to college. As the parent, you can make it that way.

I call that college ideation, and I think it is critical to a person's success in college. (I can't claim to be the originator of that term. I remember reading it once when I was in graduate school, but have been unable to find it again to reference where I found it and whose concept it really is.) What I'm talking about, though, is a person being able to imagine themselves at college, being successful. It is particularly important to those who are first-generation college students or those with little support for higher education within their immediate family, but also applies more broadly to most everyone. If a person cannot imagine themselves walking across a college campus, sitting in a class, studying, and being successful in college, it will be very difficult for them to actually do it. By what you do, how you talk about college, and the way you expose your child to the world of jobs and careers, and to the life of a truly educated, involved citizen, you can affect their future success. Limiting your discussions to college as simply job training is too simplistic and ignores one of the most important aims of higher education – broadly educating individuals and making their contributions to society more meaningful.

In much the same way as a child imagines themselves as a professional baseball player hitting a game-winning homerun, or a lawyer imagines a perfect summation before a jury, or an Olympic sprinter uses imagery to prepare for their event... if you can't imagine yourself doing it, there's a good chance you can't do it. Practicing and imagining yourself doing something successfully, is an important part of preparation for many facets of life. College is no different.

What you need to do is just make college a part of life. As parents, we often talk to our children about what they'll do next. For example, "When you get bigger, you'll go to school like your big brother" or "Next year, in middle school, you'll have a lot of different teachers, each one teaching a different subject." or "This year you hit the ball off of a tee, but next year one of your coaches will pitch to you". It seems like we don't always talk about college in the same way, sometimes making it an "if" rather than a "when". By making college one of the steps in life that they are expected to do, you increase the likelihood that they'll do it. I don't mean that not going to college is

unacceptable, or that it is the only path to success in life. But I do think it's a part of having high standards and expectations for your child and their future.

How do you do it, you ask? Here are a few ideas:

- Talk about college regularly. Relate it to jobs, careers, school, sports, your life and the lives of other adults in your child's life, etc.
- Start one, and regularly talk about your child's college savings account. Stress that it's important enough that every month you are setting aside money for them to go to college. Show them the statement and explain how the numbers get bigger, and that the envelope is addressed to them, when they're still young. Use it as a lesson in economics, interest rates or the stock market when they get older and can understand it. So as not to diminish anyone they know who doesn't have one, you should be careful how you discuss their account with them, but I think it is an incredibly powerful statement about their worth and how you view their future. Your child will become aware of the fact that not everyone has a college account, and as long as they're not throwing it in others' faces, that knowledge can be a good thing and contribute to their self-esteem.
- Ask them what they want to do when they grow up and relate that job or career to what they could study in college to do it. Talk about jobs and careers as you interact with them in daily life. When you go to the grocery store, you could talk about managing a grocery store or a farmer raising the produce or creating the advertisements you see on television; if you are shopping for a new home, you could talk about building houses, or being a realtor or an architect; driving in the car, you could talk about designing cars, building bridges or cleaning up the trash in the world by becoming an environmental scientist. Young children may not think past the checker or bagger they see at the grocery store, and may need a little more explanation to understand how other people and jobs fit into the picture. It's probably not a bad idea, once they get a little older, to clarify the difference between a job and a career also.
- Go to sporting events (yes, sports!) or cultural and educational activities on college campuses – both nearby and your alma mater. Plan to spend some extra time just wandering around campus while you're there, especially when students are around. Walk through buildings and the library, sit in a classroom, etc. This gives your child a visual image to place themselves into, that will go with their ideas about college in their future.

Outside the concept of college ideation, I think there are a couple of other things I would suggest that would contribute to your child's success in and likelihood of attending college.

1. Put your child in an educational setting as early as you are able. I am making an important distinction here between an educational setting and simply daycare. Whether it's a Montessori school, public Pre-Kindergarten, or just quality child care, and whether they are learning songs, counting, the alphabet, the planets, or whatever, they will be sponges for knowledge. Make sure to give them lots of things to learn – both at home and in "school". This will start a lifelong involvement with

learning, and make them ready for the next step (in whatever they are learning) more quickly.

2. Work with your child on their homework and do all the activities her or his teacher gives as additional activities you *could* do or web sites you *could* visit. As it is with about everything else, the kids who do the extra things (like extra homework, etc.), are the ones that are ahead of their peers. I don't mean to set up a "my kid's better than yours..." situation, but later on, when it's college admission or scholarship time, you'll definitely want your child to stand out above their peers. That work has to start early, and your involvement in it will only emphasize it's importance and strengthen your relationship with your child.

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