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Minimize SAT and ACT test stress

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LOCAL VIEW

As an educational consultant, minimizing stress related to all aspects of the college search is a topic to which I have given much thought, both as a parent with a son who went through this process (now a college junior) and as an adviser to the students with whom I work.

There is evidence to support this is the most tested generation of students of all time. Students applying to college today are more stressed about this than any previous generation, and with good reason. The expectations for them are high and their lives are more harried than ours (the baby boomers) ever were as this stage of our lives.

They think the SAT/ACT results predict both their chances of acceptance to the "best" colleges and success in life, in general. I hope in reading the following suggestions, both parents and students realize there are ways to reduce the stress.

1) Allow enough time to thoroughly prepare and understand the strategy of the SAT I test, i.e., starting in March for an early June test date is not enough time.

2) Understanding the test strategy can improve your scores, especially if you didn't prepare at all the first time you took the SAT. If your school offers a review course for a reasonable price, (or for free) take it. If you can afford a tutor who can zero in on your specific weaknesses, take advantage of this opportunity.

In either case, you will know more than if you didn't utilize these resources. The only time I don't recommend these is for a student who is a self-starter, self-motivated and is disciplined enough to use and understand by himself, the review book(s), available at your local book store, in a way as if he is being tutored.

3) Allow time to review and do the homework five days a week, just like you

would for any subject you are studying in school.

4) Take the practice tests. You will see what you understand and what you don't.

5) Don't make a career out of taking the SAT or ACT. Twice is what I recommend, unless there is an unusual circumstance to suggest taking it a third time, i.e., you received extended time which you weren't granted previously. If you are on IEP or 504 plans for diagnosed learning differences, do apply for extended time early and allow enough time for the College Board and ACT to process your request. Your high school counselor can help you with this request as well as the College Board website: www.collegeboard.com and the ACT website: www.actstudent.com.

6) Don't take the SAT in two consecutive months. You won't learn enough in the space of a month between test dates to make a difference. The SAT report that arrives with your scores provides you with statistical information based on your score as to what you can expect if you take the test again. Colleges accept your highest score from each section even if from different test dates. (The College Board sends every test result they have on file for you when you request them, including SAT IIs. ACT sends only those test dates you request).

The ACT test dates are not scheduled during consecutive months, with the exception of the September test, which is given only in 13 states and then given again in October in every state. There are always a couple of months between test dates. Even then, waiting longer than a couple of months in order to learn more can help.

7) Understand the differences between the SAT and ACT. The SAT is a test of reasoning and logic. Some problems look

easy, but are actually very difficult. You need to manage your time and know when to move on. There are also penalties for guessing on the SAT.

The ACT is a test of classroom-based knowledge acquired through courses taken in school. This is a simplistic explanation, but it is important to know the differences in the level of understanding of material, i.e., the SAT Math section covers only up through Algebra II, while the Math section on the ACT covers some trigonometry and logarithms. The time regiments in the ACT are also more strenuous with more problems in less time in every section. There are no penalties for guessing on the ACT.

8) Some students don't test well. They have test anxiety. For some students, biofeedback helps.

9) Remember, standardized tests are only one component out of several when evaluating an applicant for admission, and testing is not the component at the top of the list. Your transcript (grades) and the rigor of your course load (Honors and APs) are ahead of test scores.

10) Apply to some colleges/universities that are test optional. There are over 750 of them and you can find them listed at www.fairtest.org.

11) Keep in mind; it is the top 5 percent to 10 percent of the colleges/universities that create 100 percent of the stress and frenzy in college admissions. That's roughly 250 colleges. There are about 2,500 four year colleges/universities in this country. That leaves 2,250 other colleges and universities where the average acceptance rate is about 65-70 percent. They will also provide you with a fantastic education!

12) Finally, remember that SAT and/or ACT scores do not define you as a person or predict what you will become and achieve in life.

Judy Zodda of Framingham is a consultant who assists high school students and their families in the college search process.