



Nine SAT / ACT tips for parents

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version 1.2

Everyone wants fantastic test scores. But please keep these tips in mind:

- 1) **High schoolers often feel a great deal of pressure generally;** the SAT / ACT process layers on even more. As much as we understand that you want your student to do well on the test(s) and that you may worry that that might not happen, your main job should be to keep your student on an even keel as they go through the lengthy college application process, including taking the tests. You have perspective that your student lacks. You may be called on to bring forth your very best parental powers: sensitivity, wisdom, kindness, encouragement, drive – before all is said and done with taking the test. Your student *does* need you, teenage bravado notwithstanding.
- 2) **Nearly everyone – you, your student, friends, teachers, guidance counselors – you name it – believes, possibly secretly, that the SAT or ACT measures “intelligence.”** As experienced test people, we can confidently say “that ain’t necessarily so.” Indeed, the very fact that some students end up increasing their scores by hundreds of points puts the lie to the “intelligence” notion – did such students suddenly get smarter?? - no. Your student will almost surely believe initially that he or she is exactly as smart as the number says, and if the number is lower than expected – a common occurrence, at least when first dealing with the test – that can really crush the student’s sense of his or her “smartness.” Intelligence is complicated and comes in many varieties. The tests are narrow measures of certain abilities, some of which may not even be particularly useful (e.g., correct use of a semicolon, which the SAT people seem to think is quite a big deal). Here is one kind of intelligence that is extremely valuable and isn’t even touched on by the SAT or ACT: social intelligence. Reject the notion that the tests are magically correct about “intelligence.”

- 3) **Your student is not her test score.** You know people who never even took the SAT, or who did and got low scores, who are now reasonably happy, successful adults you are glad to have as friends and who you'd be glad to see your kids emulate in many ways. High scores are very nice, indeed, but low scores just are not the end of the world. Over time, all kinds of things other than test scores will be the major determinants of how your child fares: character, initiative, imagination, drive, venturesomeness, social skill, adaptability, a sense of humor, and much more. And luck plays a huge part.
- 4) **Not recommended:** getting dismayed or even disgusted by all the fuss over the tests and then **throwing up your hands**, saying something like, "We don't believe test scores are what really matter and so we REFUSE to sign up for that insanity; we're just going to accept whatever scores Susie gets." That was us with our first born. All we did regarding test prep was send her to a local evening class for \$300 (parental guilt is a strong driver); her scores did not improve (fortunately they were already strong). We *totally* get the sentiment, but without good prep, Susie can easily end up with scores that are lower than she could have had, maybe quite a bit lower, and her school options and even career options may be materially impacted (if your math score is low, you are not getting into an engineering program). Do you really want that obnoxious kid down the street getting that acceptance slot over Susie just by dint of having prepared effectively for the test, thereby scoring well? We worked hard with our second and third and helped them very substantially boost their scores.
- 5) **There is only so much time, energy, and money.** Higher test scores are beneficial, but they are not everything, so be smart about the level of resources you devote to improving scores. Here's a fact you probably did not know that says a lot: in 2007, Harvard rejected 1100 applicants with perfect math scores of 800 on their SATs. Probably most of those kids (and their parents) thought they were going to get in. A lovely math 800 turned out not to be everything. Hey, maybe they all had lousy essays. Here's a concrete example we just faced: a student we know has excellent scores, but her reading score could very likely be improved (moderately) with some effort. Our advice: the scores are good enough for acceptance at any college; devote available resources to other matters, not further score improvement.
- 6) **Good test prep** works toward improving scores, obviously, but it **also teaches the kids things that will be useful to them in college and beyond**. Example: being able to read critically is likely to provide life-long value. We like that.
- 7) **Effective test prep takes longer, sometimes a lot longer, than most people expect.** A couple of months, not a couple of weeks; possibly longer if you want a large score increase. Burnout can be an issue; be reasonable about your student's load. An

observation: by fall of the senior year, many students are pretty well sick of test prep, so counting on a heroic effort in October or November of that year - a hard final push to jack up scores - may be a losing strategy.

- 8) **The kids who get the best improvements from test prep are the kids who personally care about their results.** That is very different from you caring about their results. If your child is not reasonably interested in working on test preparation and so does not engage and does not do the work or just goes through the motions, you'll be wasting your money.

- 9) We almost never hear about this from parents: **in part, your child does not want to go to college.** Graduating and leaving the familiar, often decently pleasant high school "nest" can be in some ways scary and spectacularly unattractive. Of course, intellectually your student realizes that their high school world is about to disintegrate as everyone goes their separate ways. But we are emotional creatures first, and the emotions may be shouting, "I don't want to leave! I am so comfortable in my high school world!" As such, preparing for the SAT / ACT may be going hard against the grain. Filling out college applications, likewise! Help your student be courageous about the big step that is coming, the *marvelous* opportunity that comes from going off to college.

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