

Through Thick and Thin

Coping with preschool admissions decisions

Like many Manhattan moms, I've spent the past six months going through the highly hyped, widely dreaded preschool admissions process. By early last summer, I had an Excel spreadsheet of all my target schools, and I'd enlisted the help of my entire family to do the dreaded post-Labor Day calling. I completed applications by hand, went on tours, attended information sessions, brought my twins to their "play" interviews in their cutest matching outfits and wrote thank-you notes.

Now, with all of this behind me, I just have to wait until the letters go in the mail on March 8, the date ISAAGNY (the Independent School Admission Association of Greater New York, isaagny.org) has picked. Is there anything more we Type-A, concerned parents can do?

Show your interest. ISAAGNY recently decided to stop condoning first-choice letters. "Formal expressions of first choice will not be encouraged," the Web site says. But that shouldn't stop you from expressing your preferences. "Find a way to let the school know how you feel and why you feel that way," advises Gabriella Rowe, head of school at the Mandell School (mandellschool.org). "Send an email, call them on the phone, write a letter, whatever way the school gives you. The more of a parent's voice that can be heard firsthand about why they feel a connection to a certain school makes it easier when we're all sitting in a room going through a child's file."

But don't overdo it. "Check with the school once to make sure your file is complete," suggests admissions guru Victoria Goldman, author of the Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools, and admissions consultant and founder, with partner Maura Wollner, of Education First (nycedu1st.com). "Show that you're a caring parent who's attending to details, but hopefully this is the only thing you've called for," she says. "If they know you, you've called too much. You want

to be well regarded, but not well known before acceptance."

After that, fuhgeddaboutit. "Do your very best to forget that you're in the middle of this process," Rowe says. "Plan things to do with friends or your partner that are relaxing and enjoyable for you: extra yoga classes, reading best sellers. Try not to talk to other moms going through this; the more you talk, the more stressed you all get. It's really okay to say, 'I'm really stressed and I don't want to talk about it.'" And stay off the Internet!

Look for the mail carrier. Anything can happen with the U.S. Mail, but if you realize within 48 hours that everyone else heard but you didn't, call, Goldman says. However, they usually won't give you their decision over the phone. Be forewarned that even acceptances typically come in thin envelopes.

Prepare. Rowe suggests having a bottle of wine ready and then opening the letters with a spouse or a supportive friend. "Remember that this is only one tiny phase in your development as a parent," Rowe adds. "It's not a judgment of your parenting; it's a process that can be arbitrary. Find a person who can give you a reality check and make you laugh."

No means no. "You're either in or you're not," Goldman quips. "If you're not in, you don't call. No begging, no pleading. There was a reason why you were a no." Rowe agrees: "Never get on the phone if you were wait-listed or rejected and demand that the school tell you why. It's a very, very small community. Don't burn bridges. The school will always give you a pat answer. They'll never really tell you why." But, Rowe adds, you can call and tell a school how much you love them and ask if you can reapply the next year. No matter what, she adds, "continue to express it in a tactful way."

Be aggressive about the wait list. Goldman has a two-step plan for managing the wait list. "First, call the schools and let them know you

want to be on that active wait list. Don't ask them how active it is; just show them how active you want to be. Second, provide them with any and all information as to where you can be reached on a moment's notice. If they have a spot open and don't reach you the moment they call you, they may go to the next name on the list. They want to fill their class and be done with it. They've just interviewed 500 2-year-olds and 1,000 parents!"

Grab your spot. When you are accepted somewhere you want to go (fingers crossed), say yes right away, and then decline any other acceptances. Think of everyone else in this process, not just you.

"Don't sit for two weeks with two acceptances," Goldman cautions. "That's highly inconsiderate, inappropriate and selfish."

It's not the end of the world. If you don't get in anywhere, call the Parent's League. Kathy Shea, executive director of the Parent's League of New York (www.parentsleague.org), says, "We know where all the spots are and where there are still openings. The schools will call us and say they need a 2-year-old girl in the afternoons; they don't always guess right about who will accept. Then when our members call us in a panic, we'll say, 'There's another spot over there.'"

It wasn't something you said. Probably. Shea admits that there are some things parents do wrong, like being on your BlackBerry throughout a school tour.

"In that case, it's your fault," Shea says. "Otherwise, it's just about the fit; the numbers are so great."

Goldman agrees. "Take a deep breath and believe in your parenting skills and your child," she says.

From what fellow moms have told me, no matter how stressful the admissions process was, their children have ended up happy and loving school, even if it wasn't their first choice. In the meantime, as the British propaganda poster from World War II that hangs in my bathroom says, "Keep Calm and Carry On."

—Zibby Right

