

## **SHOULD YOU HIRE AN ADMISSIONS CONSULTANT?**

**By The Testing Mom**

If you live in a city where finding and getting into the best preschool or kindergarten takes research and legwork, but is infinitely doable, you can stop reading right now. You don't need a consultant to help you. Chances are, you won't be able to find one because there isn't enough business in your market to support these kinds of advisors.

On the other hand, if you're in a market where getting into preschool and kindergarten is highly competitive (i.e. New York City, L.A., San Francisco, Washington, DC), hiring a consultant is worth considering. In these cities, having an expert on your side to help you through this complicated process makes sense. It doesn't mean you are a type-A parents who has gone off the deep end.

Finding the right school for your child is a big decision. Unless you're an educator, what do you know about what each program offers and which would be best for your family and child? Someone who has been through the process many times with multiple families can steer you in the right direction, save you time, and prevent you from making mistakes that might hurt your child's chances.

### **Here are some reasons you might choose to hire a consultant:**

- Admissions advisors can talk to you about what you're looking for in a school and immediately recommend programs that fit your specifications. If you don't know what you want, they can ask you questions that will clarify your priorities. They know about things about schools that you would never learn on a tour. That kind of insider perspective can be invaluable.
- Advisors can tell you what to do that will improve your child's chances to get into each program. For example, if you are intent on one particular school, they may know that this school never admits kids with summer birthdays. They can advise you to wait a year or cross it off your list. Often, what you would do at one school

for an advantage isn't what you'd do at another school. How would you ever figure that out without prior experience?

- A consultant is loyal to you only. If you are relying on your nursery school director to help you get your child into kindergarten, she is responsible for placing one or two full classes of children. Her goal is to get every child a space even if it means you don't get your top choice.
- If you are considering private school, you're looking at paying hundreds of thousands of dollars in tuition over the next thirteen years. A good advisor can help you feel confident that your money will be well spent. Someone who knows the education options in your community might also steer your family to a gifted program that would be perfect for your child and would save you a fortune in tuition.
- After a consultant gets to know you and your child, she can be very candid with you about the culture and dynamics of each school you are considering. If she tells you a particular school wouldn't be a good fit, she knows what she's talking about.
- If you are a single parent, it is especially important to have someone in your corner you go through the process. If you don't have a partner going through this with you, it is comforting to have someone intelligent to talk with, bounce ideas off of, and cry with when your child bites another kid during a group interview (not that yours ever would, of course).

**Here are some reasons why you might choose not to hire a consultant:**

- They are expensive. Some will want you to hire them for a full package costing thousands of dollars to take you from beginning to end of the process. Others will be willing to work with you on an hourly basis on just the areas where you feel you need help.
- Often, admissions directors frown on families that hire consultants. They prefer families who have the "confidence" to go through the process on their own and are suspicious of those that seek help. If you are working with your nursery school director for kindergarten admissions and she learns you are also talking to another expert, she will resent the intrusion. My advice is not to tell anyone that you are

working with a consultant. The only exception to this is when you are moving into a market from out of town. Then, directors are more open to consultants.

- If you have lots of time and energy to do the research on your own, you can learn enough to make a good decision. Most families do not hire consultants to help them through the admissions process.

### **What to look for in an educational consultant:**

- Talk to the consultant on the phone and see if you share the same philosophy and approach to education. Does she make you feel comfortable? Is she someone you feel you can work with and trust?
- Does she normally work with kindergarten and nursery school admissions or is most of her clientele for higher grades?
- How often does she visit the schools in your community? Does she know the directors personally? What does she know about schools you are particularly interested in?
- What is her experience? How long has she been doing this?
- For nursery school admissions, it may not be necessary that she meet your child. At that level, what *you* want is more important. At the kindergarten level, she must meet your child to determine fit. Find out how much time she plans to spend with your child and how she will assess her to make the proper recommendations.
- Admissions consultants do not necessarily need to be accredited. Often, a former admissions director will become a consultant and you can trust that she knows what she is doing. On the other hand, there are professional associations that give accreditation to advisors who have met their criteria. To be designated a CEP (Certified Educational Planner), the consultant must pass an exam, have a master's degree or an equivalent, have practiced for a certain number of years, visited a certain number of schools, and take continuing education classes.
- There are consultants out there who prey on the fear and insecurities of parents, pointing out how impossible the odds are and how unlikely it is that you could get a good result without her help. If you get this vibe from a consultant, run the other

way. If an advisor makes guarantees that she will get your child into a particular school or says she always gets families their first choice, be very suspicious. If she talks about finding the right “fit” for you and your child versus getting her into an “A-list” school, you are probably in good hands.