

Twelfth Grade Roadmap

A parent's roadmap to senior year — applications and deadlines, the FAFSA, decisions and offers, avoiding senioritis, and launching your child into whatever comes next.

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THE LAUNCH YEAR

Senior year is the **launch year**: applications and deadlines in the fall, the FAFSA, decisions in the spring, and the emotional transition *out* of high school. It's busy and bittersweet — and there are many great paths, not just one. This roadmap walks the whole year, whatever comes next, in **ten steps**.

General guidance. Deadlines, aid, and processes vary by college and year, and change. This roadmap describes typical patterns; confirm all dates and requirements with each college, the FAFSA, and your child's counselor. In crisis, call or text 988.

What Senior Year Is About

WHAT TO KNOW

Senior year is about **finishing strong and launching well**: completing applications (or other next-step plans), making decisions, and preparing — practically and emotionally — for life after high school.

BY THE NUMBERS

Finish strong

the last stretch

Decide & launch

the next step

Many paths

all valid

HOW TO HELP

Support your teen through a **busy, high-stakes, emotional year** — help them stay organized and finish strong, whatever path they're heading toward.

GOOD TO KNOW

Senior year is a marathon of deadlines and decisions — organization and calm support carry your teen through it.

Fall: Applications & Deadlines

WHAT TO KNOW

The fall is **application season**: finalize the college list, complete the Common App (or others), write and polish essays, secure recommendations, and hit deadlines — typically **Early ~Nov 1** and **Regular ~Jan 1**.

BY THE NUMBERS

Early ~Nov 1

ED/EA deadlines

Regular ~Jan 1

typical deadline

Common App

+ essays & recs

HOW TO HELP

Help your teen **track every deadline and requirement** on a calendar, finalize essays, and confirm recommendations — see our College Admissions Playbook for the full process.

WATCH OUT

Deadlines are firm and fall fills fast — submit a day early, and never trust one late-night deadline for multiple schools.

File the FAFSA

WHAT TO KNOW

Financial aid is essential: **file the FAFSA** (and CSS Profile where required) as early as possible after it opens. It unlocks federal, state, and most college aid — and skipping it leaves money on the table.

BY THE NUMBERS

FAFSA

file early

CSS Profile

some colleges too

Unlocks aid

federal, state, college

HOW TO HELP

File the **FAFSA promptly** after it opens, meet every aid deadline, and don't assume you "won't qualify" — see our Paying for College Playbook.

WATCH OUT

Never skip the FAFSA — many families who assume they won't qualify would have received aid.

Keep the Grades Up

WHAT TO KNOW

Senioritis is real — but **final grades still matter**. Colleges see the final transcript, and offers *can be rescinded* for a serious drop. The message: finish the year strong.

BY THE NUMBERS

Grades count

colleges see them

Offers at risk

for a big drop

Finish strong

don't coast

HOW TO HELP

Remind your teen (kindly) that **colleges review final grades** and offers depend on finishing well — so ease senioritis without letting it tank the year.

WATCH OUT

A serious senior-year slump can cost an acceptance — colleges do rescind offers for major grade drops. Finish the job.

Understand the Decisions

WHAT TO KNOW

Decisions arrive as more than yes or no: **accepted, denied, waitlisted, or deferred**. Understanding each — and what to do next — keeps the spring manageable and hopeful.

BY THE NUMBERS

Accepted/denied

+ waitlist/defer

Waitlist

qualified, no room yet

Deferred

moved to regular round

HOW TO HELP

Help your teen **understand each decision**: send a letter of continued interest if waitlisted at a top choice, and keep perspective — outcomes are rarely the whole story.

GOOD TO KNOW

A waitlist or deferral isn't a no — but always secure and plan around a school that said yes.

Compare Offers & Choose

WHAT TO KNOW

With acceptances in hand, the last step is **comparing offers and choosing**: revisit top choices, compare **true net price** (not sticker), weigh fit, and deposit by **~May 1** (National Decision Day).

BY THE NUMBERS

Compare net price

not sticker

Revisit

admitted-student days

Deposit ~May 1

claim the spot

HOW TO HELP

Support a **clear-eyed final choice**: compare real net costs across offers, revisit finalists, and deposit at the best fit — then celebrate the decision.

WATCH OUT

Compare **net price after aid**, not the sticker — and never “double deposit,” which can cost both offers.



Support Non-College Paths

WHAT TO KNOW

Not every senior is headed to a four-year college — and that's completely fine. **Community college, trade school, apprenticeships, the military, work, and gap years** are all valid, worthy paths with their own steps.

BY THE NUMBERS

Many paths

all worthy

Trade/apprentice

+ military, work

Gap year

a real option

HOW TO HELP

If your teen's path isn't a four-year college, **support it fully** and help with its steps — enrollment, applications, or plans — with the same respect (see our career guides).

GOOD TO KNOW

A non-college path is a **legitimate choice, not a lesser one** — help your teen pursue theirs with confidence.

Navigate the Emotional Side

WHAT TO KNOW

Senior year is **emotional for everyone**: your teen faces independence, endings, and uncertainty, while you face letting go. Mixed feelings, stress, and even conflict are normal on the way to launch.

BY THE NUMBERS

Letting go

for both of you

Big feelings

stress + excitement

Normal

the bittersweet

HOW TO HELP

Make room for the **emotions** — stay connected, talk about the changes, and be a steady support as your teen (and you) navigate this bittersweet transition.

WATCH OUT

The senior-year mix of excitement, stress, and grief is normal — watch wellbeing, and treat the year as a relationship, not just a checklist. In crisis, 988.

Prepare for Life After

WHAT TO KNOW

Whatever the path, seniors need **real-life independence skills**: managing money and time, cooking and laundry basics, self-advocacy, healthcare and appointments, and problem-solving on their own.

BY THE NUMBERS

Life skills

money, time, self-care

Independence

doing it themselves

Self-advocacy

handling their own

HOW TO HELP

Use senior year to **build practical independence** — hand over real responsibilities, teach the life skills, and let your teen practice managing themselves before they launch.

GOOD TO KNOW

The most important senior-year prep often isn't academic — it's the **life skills** to thrive independently.

Celebrate & Launch

WHAT TO KNOW

The year ends with **graduation and the launch** into whatever comes next. Honor the milestone, celebrate the whole journey, and send your child forward with confidence and connection intact.

BY THE NUMBERS

Graduation

honor it

Celebrate

the whole journey

Launch

forward with confidence

HOW TO HELP

Celebrate this enormous milestone **fully** — and launch your child into their next chapter knowing they're capable, supported, and always connected to home.

GOOD TO KNOW

However the year went, your child **made it to the launchpad** — celebrate them, and trust the foundation you built together.

The Senior-Year Timeline

A friendly snapshot of the senior year — confirm all dates with each college, the FAFSA, and your counselor, since deadlines vary.

Late summer / early fall

Finalize the college list, complete the Common App, write and polish essays, and confirm recommendations.

Fall

Submit applications — Early Decision/Action often ~Nov 1, Regular often ~Jan 1; file the FAFSA (and CSS Profile) as early as possible.

Winter

Finish applications, keep grades up, submit any remaining aid forms, and watch for decisions to begin arriving.

Spring

Decisions arrive; compare offers and net price; revisit finalists; deposit at your choice by ~May 1 (National Decision Day).

Any path & all year

Non-college routes (trade, apprenticeship, military, work, gap year) have their own steps; avoid senioritis — final grades count.

THE LAUNCH

Find Your Community.

Explore our College Admissions Playbook, Paying for College, and Career Exploration guides — among **1,297 free resources** to help every student launch well.

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