

Becky:

Hello everybody, and welcome to the February edition of the Evolved Education Company podcast. I'm so excited that everyone is here. This is going to be a really great one because we are talking about preparing your child for the private school admissions process, specifically when you're thinking about applying to kindergarten, middle school, or high school. We know that there is a lot of work that goes into these applications. And today with us, we have two amazing experts that help prepare kids for kindergarten and middle and high school admissions respectively. And we're going to hear from them about their expertise and why we go through all this work to make sure that our kids are ready for not only the application process but beyond. So I'm going to take a minute to introduce Beck Goodman and Randi Dumont so you all can get to know them and hear about them. So Beck, why don't you introduce yourself and what you... Oh, and Mary Miele's here, too, of course.

Mary Miele:

Hi, I'm here. I promise. [inaudible 00:01:04].

Becky:

Mary Miele's here. So I forgot that.

Mary Miele:

That's okay.

Becky:

Sorry about that, Mary.

Mary Miele:

All's well.

Becky:

I'm going to let all of you give your elevator pitch about your qualifications and why you are involved in an admissions process. So Beck, why don't we start with you since you're our guest.

Beck Goodman:

Sure. Well, thank you all so much for having me today. My name is Beck Goodman. I'm the owner of Grow With Beck, and we're an early childhood enrichment company that's based on the Upper East Side, but we serve all of Manhattan. I personally started out as a classroom teacher, and I have my master's degree in education. I have also worked in the day camp world. I've worked as a [inaudible 00:01:46] in private schools. During the pandemic, I began a company called Pod Squad, which matched educators with families. And then in the post-pandemic world, I opened up Grow with Beck, which runs preschool preparation classes, and then helps those children transition into the kindergarten classroom through kindergarten playgroups, and one-on-one preparation, as well as teaching reading, running birthday parties, and doing a host of other fun stuff around the city. So that's a little bit about me.

Becky:

Great. I'm so glad you're here with us today. Randi, I'm going to hand you the floor next.

Randi Dumont:

Sure. Hosting birthday parties sounds super fun, by the way. So I'm Randi Dumont, and I work with Evolved doing the middle and high school placement counseling. And my career started at a public school first, helping out in special ed classrooms. I have a master's in secondary education with a focus in special ed. And then I moved over to private boarding school for about a decade. I was an admission counselor primarily. I coached two seasons of athletics. I was a dorm head, I was an advisor. I pretty much spent a third of my life raising other people's children, which was awesome. But has definitely led me to the other side of this work on the consulting side, where I have a lot of insight into the admission process in general in private school, specifically for middle and secondary entering families.

Becky:

Great. Thanks for being here today, Randi. And last but certainly not least, Mary Miele.

Mary Miele:

Hey everyone. Nice to see you or hear from you again. So basically I am just kind of here as an overseer, I guess, of the admissions process. And of course I have a lot to say on the topic of preparing kids for this process. I think my background is in special education and as a learning specialist primarily. And so I just get really excited whenever there's an opportunity to work with students on their learning process. And this is definitely one of those amazing opportunities, which I know we're going to get into right now. I'm queuing you up for that next question. Becky, go ahead.

Becky:

Yes, absolutely. So we're just going to jump right into it 'cause we have a lot of good information to talk about. So Mary, why don't we start with you? Why do we prepare our child for the admissions process?

Mary Miele:

Sure. Well, of course there is an admissions process to prepare for, so that's why we prepare them. We have to make sure that a child can write about themselves if they're a middle school or high school student. If you're in the kindergarten admissions season, then you need to be able to showcase your skills within language and cognition, pre-academics, those kinds of things. So there are skills that students need to come into this process having, and so of course we're preparing them for that success. But in addition, it's such a wonderful opportunity for your child to have some assessment around their skills within the academic area, but also in the kindergarten process, we get to look at their motor functioning, their language, their social emotional development. You as a parent get to understand your child in all of these areas and someone like Beck can put your child in a class with other kids to really get an experience like you would have in the preschool or kindergarten playgroup.

And that's really of value because you're going to learn so much about your child by doing all of that. Then we get up to middle school and high school and we have kids now who get to learn about themselves. They really develop that introspection, which is a huge deal for kids at this developmental stage of their lives. They're starting to form their identity, they're able to abstract more. They're comparing themselves with other kids in the social sense and in the academic sense. And so someone like Randi comes in and is able to really help a student to understand themselves as a learner and be able to articulate that to an admissions committee. Parents get a front row seat to this entire investigation. And it's so fun to be a part of conversations that are really about parents saying, "Wow, I really knew that about my kid, but I didn't really understand how that was actually playing out for them

in school," or, "I didn't understand that we were looking for this particular type of a school. Now I see that."

And I think that it just goes along with my ethos in this work that we have here at Evolved, which is just that we want kids to learn well, and what's the ingredients for that? Well, it's understanding our students and it's understanding who they are, and we as the adults in the room just get to go on that ride. And so parents who are coming here are coming along the ride with us to say, "Huh, who is my kid? I have this kid, but I want to know more about them as a learner and how they're developing and what we can do to nurture this amazing development." So I think, again, it's just such an exciting experience for me because I see it as twofold. Yes, I want to have success in the process for all of our clients. Everyone here is a stakeholder in that, but we also want to see kids developing and we want to see kids being excited and celebrated and learning along the way too.

So that's why we do the work that we do. And I think it's so fun to talk about. I'm so excited to share because I've been able to sit and watch Beck do some of her work, and I've been able to see Randi do a lot of her work, and it's really fun to be able to see the process of it with students. So I'm excited that they get to share with you all today what that actually looks like and what you as parents have as an invitation to do. Because if you have to apply to school anyway, you might as well go through the process in a way that's exceptional. I don't know why... You have this opportunity. So this is what we want to talk about today is sort of what is this exceptional process that we could be taking as parents. So I'll turn it back to you, Becky.

Becky:

Absolutely. Yeah. So Randi and Beck, I'm going to throw this over to you and you both can answer here for your specific division, but I want to get into some details about what students actually do when they are preparing for the process. I assume that they're usually starting with some type of assessment. What does that assessment look like? What are ways we can work with kids to develop the skills that they need? I know that I just asked six questions in one, so if you can't remember it all, let me know. But Beck, I'll start with you. In the kindergarten process, what do we do when we're actually preparing the kids for this?

Beck Goodman:

Sure. So a lot of parents come in and they're asking about the assessment portion, and we have to be flexible with that term because of course an assessment is just so that the adults in the room can get a sense of that child. There are some schools that do have a more formal assessment process like Riverdale or Horace Mann that are using the FLI. But schools, for the most part, they're doing their assessments through playgroups and sometimes through some one-on-one or small group work. And so what that looks like is twofold. They're getting to know your child in terms of that child's pre-academic skills and where they are now, what they're coming from pre-K in two, and getting to know that child socially, how they're kind of vibing with the class, how are they getting along with other people? How are they going to fit into that school culture?

And so in terms of preparing your child for that process, you want to be looking at both parts of that, making sure that they have the kinds of skills that they're going to be asked to perform. Things like drawing a self-portrait, rhyming, and really demonstrating some of that language and cognitive development that Mary alluded to earlier. And then also making sure that they're able to separate independently, they're able to explore the room, they're able to connect with peers in a shared play activity. They're able to respond appropriately to an unfamiliar adult and that they also have the self-confidence to face a kind of unnatural circumstance for them and go through it with the ability to show

their personality and really make some strong relationships in that room for sometimes only 45 minutes or an hour. So that's a little bit about the process and of course I could speak on it for days, but I hope that was a good overview.

Becky:

Yes, no, it absolutely was definitely a good overview. What are ways that you might work with students to develop some of the skills that they need?

Beck Goodman:

Sure. So again, I kind of break it down into those two main buckets, the pre-academic skills and then the kind of social-emotional relationship building skills that the schools are looking for. So for pre-academic skills, particularly from students who may be coming from a more progressive school environment or a Montessori or Waldorf program, it's the introduction of skills in the language that's going to be used during the assessment. So children may naturally have the ability to go cat bat hat sat in terms of their general language development, but do they know that's called rhyming and when asked to rhyme, can they then perform the task? So it's a lot of practice around that. And then if there are some skill gaps, making sure that we're filling it strategically. And then the other part of that in terms of that social emotional component to the process, a lot of times I hear from parents that they have a more reserved child and that particularly working with unfamiliar adults can be a source of anxiety for that child.

And that makes a lot of sense. And as I sit here on the podcast with all of you, I said before we started, "Well, I'm feeling anxious," so I think it's something we can all really relate to. One of the things that I really encourage during the work with this child, and I know I do during sessions, is building up their reservoir of strategic question asking. A lot of times when they're faced with a question like, oh, do you know what this number is? We'll see children who are coming in a little bit anxious either get very silly or quickly say, "I don't know, I can't." Maybe they'll shut down and get very quiet. And that's such a shame because we know outside of the classroom they definitely have those skills. And so one of the things we'll build, is how can they get from the adult what they need to respond correctly?

Maybe they didn't understand what was being asked and we can prepare them to say, "Can you ask me that again?" Maybe they don't understand a particular word in the question. They could say, "Oh, what does that word mean?" Or they could say, "Oh, could you show me one time?" Those are great tools that when the child is comfortable with, they're going to be able to move through the material much easier and give themselves permission to ask clarifying questions. And again, going back to what Mary said, that's important to be successful in the process, that's also an important skill to be successful in life. We want our children to be curious and independent learners. And a part of that is being able to have the self-advocacy skills to ask for what they need in an academic or social setting. So we do a lot of practice around those kinds of skill building activities as well.

Becky:

Sure, absolutely. I mean, I think the social emotional side is when we think about applying to school, where we think they're just looking at that academic piece. Can they academically hang in this school? But they also need to be able to have some resilience and be able to push through something that's challenging for them or tedious for them, or like you said, that self advocacy piece. So I think that's a huge piece of this process as well. And it's so amazing to hear that you work on that so specifically, and I want to talk to you after because my daughter is very anxious when it comes to these things, so I'd love to pick your brain, but we'll do that offline. Randi, I'm going to throw out the same questions to you.

Randi Dumont:

Yep.

Becky:

I know that there is some assessment that goes into the middle and high school piece, but I think it looks a little bit different with our older kids. You're probably looking at two similar buckets there, but I'm very curious to hear from you about what it looks like to prepare older kids for the admissions process.

Randi Dumont:

Yeah, I mean, older kids are much more upfront and in the lead in their processes, whereas, I mean Beck, I love that you highlighted all the things that students are doing in the younger student process, but they're alongside their parents too. Their parents are also providing a lot of information about their candidacy. And parents are also doing that too with middle and high schoolers, but they're taking more of a backseat. The older kids do have to have some level of access and articulation to talk about themselves. They have to understand themselves as a learner. They have to know how to talk about their current school environment, what's going well, what's not going well, some of their strengths and weaknesses or strengths and growing edges in their learning. But also evaluators, admission teams are going to also be looking for softer skills in those older kids too.

And those are more character based skills like resilience, your ability to navigate something that comes up as challenging for them or problem solving, social emotional skills. How do they connect with their peers, how do they collaborate with their peers? And of course, each school is going to be looking at qualities that specifically sort of fit and serve their academic programming and their culture, their school culture. So it's not the same across the board in terms of what exactly they're looking for, but by and large, the older kids are going to be needing to convey those soft skills and the academic skills. Academic skills of course, being intellectual curiosity, how do you engage in a discussion, how do you engage in your learning and all those kinds of things related to the core academic skills. So those are the two main areas. But then I would also say older kids, they're also sort of looking for who are you going to be as a community member, which touches on the soft skills, but also what are you bringing to this space?

And I would say, just to summarize that in one word, it's more like their extracurricular involvement or one phrase, extracurricular involvement. What else are you doing outside of being a student? And of course your soft skills. How are you going to contribute to this community? So those are the main areas of evaluation for the older kids, which will rely on their engagements during the school visits. Sometimes even on tours, they're sort of looking at whose engaged in the tours. It's not sort of an exact science, but how are they behaving on a school visit? Also interviews of course, they're more one to one at the middle and high school level. Sometimes some schools will have group interviews, but primarily it's one to one interviews, which are typically anywhere from 20 minutes to 40 minutes depending on the school and the time they have.

And also the writing. The writing for this process is largely narrative writing. Narrative writing, being focused on really sharing your story. Basically, admission officers are looking for, what do we learn about you as a result of reading this essay? So it's not your typical analytical or like, all right, opening paragraph, body paragraph. It's not necessarily tight like that. It's more about what are you sharing about yourself that makes you more of a known candidate in this process?

Becky:

That's great. That's all really good information and so many different facets of this application process that I'm sure a lot of people didn't think about. What are some ways you specifically work with students to help develop the skills that they need?

Randi Dumont:

Yeah, I actually want to sort of piggyback on what Beck was saying about mental health and talk a little bit about how I help students with their self-awareness in this process. I think a lot of kids, both middle and high school and kids come to this process so tightly wound and so anxious and so aware that they're being evaluated, especially in this culture, this fast-paced sort of New York City life here and competitiveness is a big part of their lives and of this admission process. Unfortunately, it's just sort of the way that it is. But I help kids grapple with that and address some of their cognitive patterns around how they approach this process. I think what Mary said earlier about how do we make this process exceptional for families? For me, it's about helping both the parents and the kids find joy and excitement in this process.

Another key word Mary said was that they're being celebrated. So to me, that also means parents are recognizing all these wonderful things about their kid, but it also means the students are building self-confidence through this process. So the way in which I help kids do this is, for example, most, I would say yeah, most probably 80% of the kids that I work with at both levels, middle and high school entering are very nervous about the interview. They're very nervous about a one-to-one situation. It's very anxiety inducing to feel like you're talking to an adult that you don't know and you're getting a bunch of questions about yourself and you're expected to have a conversation about who you are and your interests. And on the surface that doesn't seem bad. But you also put behind that the context of this process and the weight that kids feel to perform and to do well.

And they feel like every step of this, if they make a misstep, then it means their application, they've done something wrong. So you really want to address this anxiety piece with them so that they can settle into the process more effectively. And one way that I do that is using this emotional recognition exercise where you go through, it's a self-awareness exercise that basically helps kids feel more empowered to problem solve when they're feeling anxious or worried or nervous. And this is most appropriate for low level kinds of feelings, not outbursts, and kids who are really having an extreme reaction to this. So this is more low level sort of anxiety. So you take them through the process of identifying how am I feeling or what is it that I'm feeling? Let's identify the emotion. Most kids, it's some sort of fear-based emotion. Second, you sort of gather information with them.

You say, "Okay, what do you think is contributing to this?" Okay, maybe they say, "Everyone says the interview is so important and I'm worried I'm going to freeze." Or they go into what if scenarios, "What if I say um or like?" Or, "What if my sentence doesn't make sense?" They go through these endless what if scenarios. So we're gathering information. Then we brainstorm on what are some strategies that you can use to make yourself feel better? What are some things that you can turn to ease that anxiety a little bit? Take it from an eight to a four, not get rid of it because you also have to validate that these feelings are totally normal. You are totally human and it's okay. And help them understand that anxiety is your body's physiological way of saying, "Hey, this is really important, so thank you." Sort of shake hands with it and move forward.

So help them brainstorm what are some strategies that I can use to make myself feel better? Sometimes that's deep breathing. Maybe they'll say, "Okay, well sometimes if I wear my favorite outfit, I feel just much more confident." Great, let's go with that. Or maybe it's just positive self talk. So you go through a list of what are some strategies I can use to make myself feel better? And then you help them evaluate, have these strategies worked in the past? So you help them identify where else have you used these

strategies? And maybe they latch onto a couple or maybe they say, "You know what? I don't think any of these are going to be appropriate for this situation." So then you go back to the brainstorming. So you take them through it all the way through the planning and act stage where you come up with a plan of like, okay, I'm going to my Dalton interview on Monday.

It's in person, it's at this time. We go through a whole plan of what you can do to manage those nerves. And then when it's over, you reflect because you know that they're not just going to be interviewing at Dalton, most likely. The next week they have Birch, Birch Wathen Lennox, the next week they have Riverdale, whatever, it's ongoing. So you basically go through this emotional recognition exercise to help them, first of all, empower them to help settle themselves, empower them to just understand what's also going on. And it also gives you a space, like I said, validate some of those emotions. And I think it's really good for them just to say it, just to talk through it. Maybe they don't want to talk about it at home because they don't want to disappoint their parents and say, "Hey, I'm really nervous to interview at Dalton and I don't think I'm going to do well."

Right? They need a safe, neutral space, non-judgmental space to process through that so they can just put it all out there so they can see it and then identify some of their cognitive patterns around the situation. So that was sort of a long-winded example, but this is an exercise I use with almost all of my kids, honestly, even if they're very minimally sort of worried about the interview. But I think this sort of support helps kids settle into the process so they can be more authentic. And that's what you want to achieve is you want them to be able to settle into an authentic conversation where they can represent themselves with confidence.

Becky:

Absolutely. I think something that I'm taking away from both of what, Randi and Beck, you guys have said is that these skills that we're teaching them, yes, they're amazing for the application and the interview and the playgroup and whatever it is, process. But my takeaway is really that these are life skills. You're going to go to an interview as an adult for a job, and you need to learn how to do that. So not only are we preparing the children for the actual school interview, but even in school, they're going to have to approach a teacher, whether you're in kindergarten or 12th grade, you have to approach a teacher, ask for help and tell them how you're feeling and tell them why you're feeling that way. So from the youngest all the way up through the oldest, our common theme here is preparing them for this social emotional piece. This is such a huge piece of the application process that I just want to make sure that everyone knows that we really spend a lot of time on because it really can have a large impact for the process, but also beyond.

So thank you both for that. All of you, Mary, Randi, Beck, I would love to hear from you, what are one or two key takeaways for parents that they can do to take action on today as they start to think about how to prepare their children for their application, any of their respective applications?

Mary Miele:

Well, this is Mary, I'll start. I just think the biggest thing you can do right this minute is just get an assessment. So meet with Beck, meet with Becky on our team, meet with Randi. Any educator that could understand this process and give your child a recommendation for an assessment would be very helpful because I think it's great to just know what your child has in terms of strengths for this process and what your child has in terms of challenges so that you can be in the know on how to address those areas. So that would be my go do it now, get an assessment, it's going to be so important. I think that's my biggest advice. Who wants to take next, Beck?

Beck Goodman:

Sure. Well, I second that. I think it brings peace of mind to the parents and then therefore to the child when they have a good understanding of where their child kind of falls and what we can do to support them throughout the process. And the other big thing that I'd say that's so important when working with the littles, as I refer to the age group as, is doing the modeling of what you're hoping to see during the process. So if they're the anxious kid who might have a little difficulty or who might be getting a little too silly when they're in a challenging situation, is for you, when you are talking to them about how the day went and you say, "Oh, what did you do on the playground today?" And they give an answer that might be a little bit more on the incoherent side, which is totally developmentally appropriate.

Instead of doing what a lot of adults do and either going, "Oh, that's silly," and then brushing past it or saying, "Oh, are you telling me you and Susie played on the playground?" And guessing and doing the work for them, model that ask that you're going to want them to do in the classroom go, "Oh, I don't really understand what you're telling me. I heard you say playground. Did something happen at the playground?" And give them another opportunity to practice that expressive language and hear you asking those questions and doing that a couple of times, they will pick up on it and you will see a huge change in how they're able to navigate unfamiliar circumstances.

Becky:

Love that. Love that.

Randi Dumont:

I was going to say the exact same thing. I was going to combine both modeling, modeling self-reflection in particular, and also being very intentional or bring a new level of intentionality to your conversation with your kids. So it literally, it mirrors exactly what Beck just sort of said, but for this age group, I would say an example of sort of modeling self-reflection would look like maybe to a middle school entering kid saying something like, "All right, we're going to pause right now. I got to run to the store for a snack real quick because I know that if I get too hungry, I'm going to get cranky and it's going to happen." So it doesn't necessarily need to be related to academics. You're modeling a level of self-reflection. Or when you're talking to your older kid and maybe you're asking questions about, or you're talking about the school day and the kid's like, "Science is boring."

And then you'd say, "Oh, I remember..." Well, first of all, intentional question. You can follow up on that with questions like what Beck was saying, "What do you mean by boring?" That's really nonspecific. Or, "Give me some more language to describe what you're not enjoying about science class." But you can also say, "I remember feeling similar about science class when I was a kid, and I think it had a lot to do with the fact that all we ever did were PowerPoint slides. We never really got to do experiments through something that I really felt like I thrived in when I was your age." So again, you're modeling the self-reflection that you ultimately want to see, and you're also bringing more intentionality to the conversations that you have with your kids.

Becky:

One of my favorite questions, if a child ever says, my child or anybody else that says that they're bored, I like to say, "Well, what does bored mean to you?" I want to know. What do you constitute as boring? Because that actually could be different from what I constitute as boring, right? And then they usually, well, and they go on and explain all different things, but makes them think a little bit like, what is boring? So that's my opinion.



Randi Dumont:

The language piece is interesting too. Especially, I'm noticing with the older kids and the older that I get, the less connected I am to their semantics and their language. I have so many older kids being like, "It's just a vibe. I'm like, "No, I actually don't know. What do you mean by it's a vibe?" I don't want to sound dated by asking them that, but you can't say it's a vibe in an interview or on your essay, you've got to use more specific language. So I think that's another thing you can start doing as a parent now is really... And you can have fun with it. Be like, look, you got to explain this to your mother. I am so far away from knowing what a vibe is like, please just give me more. You can have fun with it too. So that would be ideal, honestly [inaudible 00:31:40].

Becky:

Nothing makes you feel old like working with high school kids.

Randi Dumont:

No kidding. No kidding. But no, it's fun.

Becky:

Yeah. Well, thank you both, all three of you so much for being on the podcast. Sorry Mary, I wasn't intentionally forgetting about you. You're just always here. We're so excited that Randi's on our team and that we're going to be partnering with Beck a little bit to work on some of that kindergarten admissions process. So we have a really great building of a team here. If you wish to work with any of us or want to learn more, we will put all of our contact information in the show notes. Please don't hesitate to reach out. We are here to answer questions and help you through this process. That's why we do this. We'd love to help through this process. So definitely all of us on this call can answer any questions that you have on this podcast. And thank you all so much. We look forward to seeing quote unquote, "everybody" for the March 2023 podcast and we'll see you later. Thank you. Bye.