

Becky Reback (00:00):

A weird face.

Julia Calantone (00:03):

Okay, I'm going to start. Everyone ready?

Caitlin Hasson (00:05):

Ready.

Becky Reback (00:07):

Hi everyone. Welcome back to the Be Evolved podcast. I am Becky Rieback, the director of academic assessment and a school placement and special education advisor here at Evolved. And I'm here today with Caitlin and Julia. I'll let you guys introduce yourselves.

Julia Calantone (00:25):

I'm Julia. I am a school placement advisor and support families applying nursery through high school.

Caitlin Hasson (00:31):

And I'm Caitlin. I focus on nursery and kindergarten readiness, so the earliest end of this whole process.

Julia Calantone (00:39):

And I primarily work with families on middle and high school applications, but I certainly have supported families in the nursery and early elementary school as well. So I kind of run the gamut. But between the three of us, we've pretty much covered the full age range families deal with here at Evolved. And today we want to dig into the process of. I'm sorry, today, rewind. Today we want to dive into the process that trips almost every family that we work with, the parent statement and the student's essay and the parent essay and the student and parent interviews as well. Wait, I'm going to re-say that because it didn't sound good. Sharon, edit. Okay. Between the three of us, we've pretty much covered all age ranges of families here at Evolved. And today we want to dig into a part of the process that trips up almost every family that we work with, and that is the parent statement, the student statement, and both the parent and student interviews.

Becky Reback (01:50):

Which on paper and on Ravenna or whatever final site you're using look like four completely separate tasks to work on.

Caitlin Hasson (01:59):

Right. But the way we work with families, they're really not separate at all.

Julia Calantone (02:03):

Exactly. We really focus with families to make it one cohesive file and each piece is a different piece to the puzzle. So we want to start with that idea because it changes how you approach every single piece we're going to talk about, thinking that they're all connected. Before we get into what most families work on, including the parent statements, the student statements, interviews, there's actually a step that comes before all of that. And when families start an application, they tend to focus immediately on the things they have to produce. What are we going to write in the parent statement? How should our child answer

this essay question? What are we going to say in the interview? But as we know here at Evolve, those really aren't the only pieces of the application.

Caitlin Hasson ([02:50](#)):

Exactly. And I think this is such an important mindset shift. Before you decide what you're going to say, you need to understand what the entire application map looks like. So what you can do is literally map out everything the admissions committee is going to receive about your child. Some of those pieces are things that you control and some of those pieces you don't.

Becky Reback ([03:10](#)):

So let's actually name them. There's the transcript or the report card. There's teacher recommendation forms, which I feel like some people think the teacher's writing a letter, but it's actually a form that you send for the teacher to fill out. There might be standardized testing, there might be a school report or administrator recommendation, and then there's all the pieces that the family contributes that kind of need to speak to everything else that's being shared. There's the parent statement as we shared, the student essays, interview for parent and student, and sometimes often additional information about activities or interests. So the admissions committee is taking all of those pieces as one big file and looking at them all together when they look at your family.

Julia Calantone ([03:59](#)):

Right. So our first question with the family is not necessarily what should you write or what should you say? It is what is the application already going to be saying about your child? So before we get into all the writing and the interviewing, we have to start with the basics. So start with the transcript, put it in front of you, look at it as if you were an admissions officer who had never met your child and ask yourself a couple of questions. What do you see? What are obvious strengths? Because they're looking at transcripts usually across two or three years, so they will be able to see trends. What subjects stand out? Is the performance across those subjects relatively consistent? Is there an upward trajectory? Is there a downward trajectory? Is there a year or a subject that might raise a question for the admissions officer?

([04:56](#)):

And putting that all together, what story does the transcript tell about your child as a learner?

Caitlin Hasson ([05:05](#)):

And then you can do the same thing with the recommendations. So even though you're not going to see them yourselves as parents, you can hypothesize. So think about the feedback you've received from your child's teachers. You can look at report card comments, you can think about parent-teacher conferences. If I called your child's teacher today and said, tell me about this student, what do you think that they would say? And I think this is always sometimes hard too because you're starting this process at the beginning of the school year when your child is just going back to school, but you can also reflect on last year as well.

Becky Reback ([05:37](#)):

Yeah. So I think we need to think about what are going to be strengths and what are going to be areas to work on. So first, what are they almost certainly going to identify as strengths? Maybe your child is incredibly engaged in class, maybe they're very, very intellectually curious or they collaborate really well with their peers. Perhaps they persevere when something's difficult or they're really independent. So those are things that are probably going to show up in recommendations if those are things that describe your child.

Julia Calantone ([06:12](#)):

And you also have to think about and be realistic about what the teacher might identify as an area of growth. We often actually recommend reaching out to your teacher and asking those questions so you aren't surprised if something is said about your child in a recommendation or in their file. So what possibly could a teacher say about your child? Maybe they rushed through their work, maybe they're still developing their organization strategies, maybe they don't participate as much as they could and they wait to be called on instead of volunteering for participation. Maybe they need reminders to stay on task or they're working on advocating for themselves or they have amazing ideas in their head, but it's really tricky for them to get those ideas on paper. Whatever it is, there's no need to panic about it, but we need to understand that that is likely going to be a part of the application and we want to be able to use the parent and the student part of the application to explain or get ahead of or rationalize some of the areas of growth that our teachers might talk about.

Caitlin Hasson ([07:26](#)):

Right, because this is exactly where the strategy starts. So once you've kind of mapped out that whole transcript and you've hypothesized what the recommendations are going to say, you can ask yourself, what does this admissions committee already know? What questions might they still have about my child and what do we want the parts of the application that we control to add to that?

Becky Reback ([07:46](#)):

Yeah, Caitlin, I feel like that's such an important distinction. You don't need to try to make every part of the application say the exact same thing. If your kid is really strong and you know that their report card or transcript is going to show that they're strong, you don't need to write the entire parent statement about how academically strong they are. They get it. You want to use that space to support them in a different way that they don't necessarily see.

Julia Calantone ([08:15](#)):

100%. And there is an area of growth that is likely to appear in the recommendations or on the transcript, and we can really think thoughtfully about whether we want to or how we want to contextualize that area of growth. So we're not excusing it, we're not hiding it, we are contextualizing it, and I think that's a super important distinction for families. Maybe we take organization as an example here as being an area of growth, but your child has just started using a planner or meeting independently with teachers or emailing teachers for help or breaking assignments into smaller pieces and becoming much more independent. So that is super important. And we're not just talking about the challenge, we're really talking about the growth and the trajectory of it. So when I'm coaching families to how to talk about it, I kind of think of the sandwich idea where we introduce the struggle and we talk about what we've been doing and then how we've been showing growth.

Caitlin Hasson ([09:22](#)):

Right. And I think that parents definitely sometimes think that admissions is about presenting this perfectly polished child, and it's really not. I think schools know that children are developing. They are educators. They know that kids aren't perfect, and it can be much more compelling to be able to say, "Here's a real strength, here's something that they're developing," and demonstrate your parenting by showing, "Here's what we're doing about it. Let's talk about the success we've been seeing." It just gives the school a much fuller picture of the learner.

Becky Reback ([09:50](#)):

Definitely. And then there's one more piece of the application map that I would add before we start writing anything, and that's the perspective school, because we're not trying to explain who this child is. We are, but we're also trying to tie in why this child, why our family, and why do this school tie together?

Julia Calantone ([10:10](#)):

Exactly. And now we have three things in front of us. We have the child's strengths, we have their areas of growth and what they're working on successfully, and we have what this particular school offers and values and why we are choosing this for this particular student. That's where we start finding a story. How does the child learn at their best? What environment helps them thrive? What does this school actually provide that connects those ideas and where do the family and child's values genuinely align with the school's values?

Caitlin Hasson ([10:54](#)):

Right. So before you start drafting anything, that's the exercise. Map the entire application, look at the transcript, or in my case, for the early childhood families, you might want to think about hypothesizing what the school might say. Look at how your teachers will be recommending your child. You can also think about. Sorry, hold on. Pause. I need to read this because I can't process it. Okay. All right, let me start this part over. So before you start drafting anything, that's the exercise. You're going to map the entire applications. You're going to look at the transcript, or in my case, for the early childhood students, you might hypothesize what the recommendations might say, look at how your teachers will be recommending your child. We'll identify the areas that will already be evident in terms of strengths. We'll also identify areas of growth that may benefit from some context, and then think about what the school will then still need to understand about your child.

([11:52](#)):

And then we'll also look at the perspective school and ask why does this particular environment make sense for this particular learner?

Becky Reback ([11:59](#)):

Yes, right. And once you've done that, then you can start thinking strategically about parent statements, essays, interviews, because each of those are like pieces of the puzzle and you want to complete a full picture for the admissions committee.

Julia Calantone ([12:17](#)):

Absolutely. So let's shift gears a little bit and let's talk about the parent statement as we've been kind of queuing that up a little bit. So the biggest mistake we see is parents writing what they think sounds impressive instead of what is actually true and specific. So admissions officers read hundreds of parent statement essays a season and they can very much spot a generic statement instantly. Our child is kind, curious, a hard worker versus rooted in real observable moments.

Caitlin Hasson ([12:52](#)):

Yeah, I see this a lot, especially in nursery and kindergarten families, especially because these kids don't necessarily have a school track record yet where we're looking at transcripts and things like that. So I think it's really important that we don't use these big, vague adjectives. I think my advice is quite the opposite, go small and very specific. So you can even think about, and it doesn't have to be a dramatic story, it could be something very small, like what happened at breakfast, in the bath, at a play date, what's actually something true that you watched happen with your kid?

Julia Calantone ([13:24](#)):

And this is the whole thing. So this is what I've been drilling into my clients this season. Don't start with a list of adjectives. Start with the scenes. It's okay if it feels like it starts in the middle because you are going to explain it and it ties right back to the themes. If the child's story is going to be focused on empathy, being the family peacemaker, being the kind one on the playground, I had a family this year that gave a great example of how their son carries band-aids everywhere in case a friend hurts himself, which is so sweet. The parent statement is a great place to give the origin story and the home life evidence for that.

Becky Reback ([14:10](#)):

Yes, definitely. And I feel like there's the interview side version of the same trap where parents want to use the statement to list every accomplishment and then it creates a mismatch later because in the interview when the child is interviewing, they're hopefully not going to walk in and recite their resume. So you really want the two to match up. Maybe they have the same background idea or the same similar themes or ones, as we said before, that complete that puzzle that add to each other.

Julia Calantone ([14:47](#)):

Right. We really steer families away from that very hard. The statement is for what only a parent can offer. So we're thinking about the history, we're thinking about who this child is when nobody is grading them. Two or three well-developed anecdotes beat eight tiny rushed ones every single time.

Caitlin Hasson ([15:12](#)):

Yeah, and I think here's something else that kind of surprises parents a lot. So the statement is definitely being read as a window into your child, but it's also being read into a window to you as a parent. So I think sometimes parents are asking us, "Wait, they're evaluating us too," and I think yes, they are, definitely.

Julia Calantone ([15:29](#)):

They are, they are, they are. The tone matters. Self-awareness matters. A parent who writes with warmth and humility and understanding their child's strengths and areas of growth signals what kind of partner they're going to be for the school over the next many years.

Becky Reback ([15:47](#)):

Definitely. And I feel like that's the biggest idea underneath and keep coming back to, that schools are admitting a whole family, not just a student, and that they need to see that family through the interview and through the statement too.

Julia Calantone ([16:04](#)):

Absolutely. So for the statement itself, here is a checklist that we like to use. So we start with a real scene, connect the same two or three themes throughout the rest of the file. Don't repeat the resume, right? So let's give other anecdotes that are new to the admissions officer. Keep it warm rather than performative and have someone outside the family read it before you submit.

Caitlin Hasson ([16:36](#)):

The last one especially, I think it's genuinely really hard to see your own kid clearly on the page when you're that close to them. And also when you've spent so much time on the essay, it's hard to separate

yourself from what you've written. So I think anyone benefits from bringing a second set of eyes into an essay, whether it's someone like us or it's a family friend.

Julia Calantone ([16:56](#)):

100, 100%. Again, let's shift gears because we want to make sure we give the whole picture of what we think about here at Evolved, and we're going to talk about the student essay. So equally as important as the parent writing is the student writing, and this is for older applicants, usually sixth grade and older. Occasionally, maybe a fourth or fifth grade applicant might have a short form writing, but usually it's middle school and above. And this might be closer to a personal essay, but Caitlin, do you want to talk a little bit about what this might look like on the younger end? Obviously nursery and kindergarten and perhaps some elementary.

Caitlin Hasson ([17:35](#)):

Yeah, of course. So at the nursery and kindergarten level, obviously they're not asking for a full-blown writing sample or essay at this point. I think in an in-person play visit, especially for kindergarten, they might be asking children to write their name, draw a picture, perhaps with a short caption about what they've drawn. For preschool, it's really more of a child-led play-based observation. We're not expecting a one-year-old to be able to write anything, but the same principle holds. I think schools do see when a child appears overly coached, so that's important to keep in mind.

Julia Calantone ([18:09](#)):

Yes. And for the older students, the number one thing we want them to understand is that the goal is not to sound impressive, it's to sound like themselves. So parents should not be writing this for the kids. Us as admissions advisors should not be writing these for the kids. Admissions officers can spot an over-parented essay from a mile away. So of course we want to make sure that it sounds good and is edited, but polished vocabulary doesn't match how a 12-year-old actually talks or a topic that very clearly was not the student's idea.

Becky Reback ([18:46](#)):

Definitely. And I'll say most schools require the ISE or a standardized test where there's a writing sample of your child's writing. So they'll have the student essay, the ISE sample, and then when they visit, they might even have them write a prompt. So you really want to make sure that it's the student's true writing and their true voice. And that's something that we'll practice kind of an interview prep too, because we want the interview voice to match the essay voice as well.

Julia Calantone ([19:16](#)):

Yes, which is exactly why we start with listening and not writing. So we ask a lot of open questions. What do you actually care about? What is something you've struggled with? What is a moment where you're proud of? And we listen for which of these connect back to the themes we've already established for the rest of the file. So when we work with the older students to write their essays, we start with a 30-minute just brainstorming so that way they have ideas to go off of to actually sit down and get some writing done.

Caitlin Hasson ([19:50](#)):

So it's not, here's a new idea, go write about it. You're finding the true story the kid already has that happens to also live inside the family's theme.

Julia Calantone ([19:58](#)):

Exactly. And specificity, as we've said time and time again, is everything. So I learned the importance of teamwork could be written by any student anywhere, but if you write, "I learned to stop always calling the plays after my friend Maya told me I never let anyone else pick the game at recess," that's a 12-year-old actual voice and actual memory, and it shows more character in one sentence than a whole page of generalities.

Becky Reback (20:29):

Definitely agreed. And that's the exact specific memory that we would want in the back pocket for their interview because it gives them a real and concrete example to talk about instead of just saying one word or giving a quick summary or listing accomplishments.

Caitlin Hasson (20:49):

And is it okay for an essay to show something imperfect, like mistake or a struggle? Parents always want to edit that out first every time.

Julia Calantone (20:57):

I mean, it's more than okay. It's expected. It usually is the first thing we ask parents to stop cutting. Schools aren't looking for a finished product. Your child is in school to learn and grow, so they're looking for a child who can reflect honestly on their own experience. They're looking for a child that reads mature and being able to reflect on themselves shows as maturity and not weakness.

Becky Reback (21:25):

Agreed. I think both in the essay and in the interview, it's really important that your child can speak honestly about something hard or a challenge that they've had to overcome, and that's so much more memorable to the person interviewing them or the officers reading their essay than just a few positive answers that don't get into it.

Julia Calantone (21:53):

Yeah. So to sum it up, the student's own voice, a specific scene over a general statement ties back to the same core theme as the rest of the file and is genuinely good if it shows growth rather than perfection.

Becky Reback (22:11):

Okay. So interviews, I feel like I keep sneaking that in. So the first thing I tell a nervous student is that the interviewer is already really excited to get to know them and talk to them. They've probably, if the parent statement has been submitted, they've already read the parent statement and it isn't a test. They're not trying to figure out what they're going to say wrong. They just really, really want to get to know them. And I feel like that reframe really helps take the pressure off and lets them go into it with a different mindset.

Julia Calantone (22:47):

I've watched you say that exact line to kids and watch their shoulders actually drop.

Becky Reback (22:54):

Oh, thank you. And I think something I really wanted to mention too is that it's really important not to script any answers that can really backfire and they'll freeze. It also could read as rehearsed or if a second follow-up question comes at a slightly different angle than they practiced. So instead, we really try to get them talking about a handful of things, almost just to lift their conversation and have some answers in

their head. So like a favorite book, a subject they like and why, an activity they love with a specific moment from it that they could draw on if they want to, something they're proud of, and again, a challenge that they've had to overcome or something that was hard and what they did about it to push through.

Caitlin Hasson ([23:49](#)):

Yeah. And I think this seems to map right back to all the themes we've been talking about this whole episode.

Becky Reback ([23:55](#)):

Definitely, I agree. And I feel like we want the student to be able to talk easily and specifically about, let's say it's building a project rather than to say, "I like building things." We'd want them to be able to talk through a project that they did after school or in school, how they've collaborated. It adds so much more than just, "I like to build."

Julia Calantone ([24:22](#)):

Yes. And what is inevitable is. Wait, hold on. Sorry. Okay, redo. What about the inevitable why this school question with older kids?

Becky Reback ([24:36](#)):

Yes, that one can get asked and also can get answered just as generically, or I think also if it's over rehearsed, it's like a freeze or a stumble. I try to push kids past like, "Oh, I love the academics and the small class sizes," because we can really say that for almost every private school, and to think about something specific that they noticed on a visit, or even we'll go through the website with them so they get to really pick out what they like so they can speak to exactly what they like in the interview.

Caitlin Hasson ([25:12](#)):

Yeah. At the nursery and kindergarten level, of course, this is an entirely different format. It's more of a supervised play visit rather than a sit-down interview, but the same idea holds. The school's looking for the real kid, not a coached or performed one.

Becky Reback ([25:29](#)):

Definitely. And for a little bit older kids, even mid-elementary up, logistics matter too. So the eye contact, a good handshake, being able to really go back and forth a bit in genuine conversation and ask the interviewer questions, and I feel like that one is underrated. So even just practicing sitting and talking with an adult who isn't their parent, for a lot of kids, that's actually the unfamiliar part, not just the content. So even just sitting down with us and having a mock interview can be helpful.

Julia Calantone ([26:07](#)):

Do you think mock interviews really help?

Becky Reback ([26:10](#)):

Yeah, I think so. Even a casual one at the dinner table, I think it's not about a perfect performance. It's just warming up to the, how do I talk about myself to an adult? How do I share a story instead of just a one-liner? But definitely if you're doing it at home, I would keep it short and low state because I feel like you don't want the dinner table to turn just into rehearsal every night. That kind of undoes the point.

Julia Calantone (26:43):

Yeah, absolutely. And finally, let's talk about the parent interview and really showing up as a family. I think for some families, they genuinely forget about this piece and how the way the parents show up has a real impact on admissions or not admissions for the family.

Caitlin Hasson (27:07):

Completely. I feel like parents obviously know that this is coming. They do prepare and all that, but I think it's a big deal because where this idea from the top of the episode comes into play, schools aren't just admitting your child, they're admitting your whole family, especially if we're talking about a kindergarten placement at a K to 12 school. It's a 13-year commitment potentially, and they're asking consciously or not, are these parents going to be good partners? Will they trust our teachers? Will they engage within our community? Will they be able to handle a hard conversation about their kid with grace? Those are all things they're definitely looking for.

Becky Reback (27:43):

Yeah, agreed. And I think a lot of what we do to prepare family interviews is similar to child prep too. It's the genuine listening, not just listing your accomplishments with one word answers. I think that really matters for the parents in that room, just like it matters for the 12-year-old that's sitting across the table in the student interview.

Julia Calantone (28:08):

Definitely. So how should parents actually prepare the same way that their kid is preparing, not scripted, but thoughtful. So know why this particular school that you are walking into, specifically beyond prestige or convenience that it's down the block from you. Be ready to talk about your child honestly, include an area of growth and not just a highlight reel.

Caitlin Hasson (28:32):

Yeah. And for families that have two parents or more than two parents who maybe see their child a little bit differently or have different instincts for a parent interview, for example, maybe in a couple where you have one parent who is very quick to jump in and the other one is maybe more reserved, it's good to go in with a plan. So we coach them to get aligned beforehand. You don't necessarily need to have identical talking points, but a shared understanding of the child's story and what things you want to share with the school and your reasons for choosing this particular school are really important.

Julia Calantone (29:08):

Yeah. Admissions officers a hundred percent notice when parents seem to be telling two different versions of the same family.

Becky Reback (29:17):

Yes, definitely agreed. I feel like even we'll do the mock questions with our families too, and when parents contradict each other, for example, which subject the kid struggles with, it's a tiny moment, but even in our mock interviews with families, we can tell. So I think that's important to be on the same page, as you said.

Caitlin Hasson (29:41):

Yeah. And the tone also matters enormously too, arriving with warmth, genuine curiosity about the school, and also listening too, because part of the interview is a conversation oftentimes, and so you want

to make sure that there's back and forth with your interviewer, and schools are going to be picturing you At pickup, at the parents association meeting, in an email exchange about your kid's homework. And so they want to be able to understand how you're going to arrive to those types of scenarios.

Julia Calantone ([30:11](#)):

So the parent interview is not just a formality that is tacked on to the end. It's really a piece of the story or of the puzzle that we have been building throughout this entire application process. And you as the parents are the ones telling it in person now in real time as the people who know your child best. And it's important to take this part of it really seriously. Okay. Well, we gave a lot of information and we talked about a lot of really important pieces of the application process. So I want to hear from Julia and Caitlin and I'll chime in. Julia, I'll start with you. If you are a parent listening and you can only take one thing away from today, what would it be?

Becky Reback ([31:01](#)):

I think that don't think of the parent statement and the student statement and the two student and parent interviews as four separate assignments or things to just get through.

Caitlin Hasson ([31:17](#)):

Yeah, I think the thing to remember is that you're telling one cohesive story about your family from different vantage points. So the more those vantage points agree with each other, the clearer and more compelling the picture is for the school reading it.

Julia Calantone ([31:30](#)):

And I would say pick your two or three true specific themes early and let every piece that you are doing in this process support them. And remember that you are being evaluated as a family. So showing up as thoughtfully for you as the parent as you are coaching your child to show up is very important.

Becky Reback ([31:55](#)):

Definitely. And I feel like that's just the kind of thing we help families work on through one-on-one across age ranges and for adults and for the parents. So if any of this resonated, you can find us at Evolved Education Company. Link in the show notes.

Caitlin Hasson ([32:14](#)):

Thanks so much for listening. See

Julia Calantone ([32:15](#)):

You next time.

Becky Reback ([32:17](#)):

Bye.