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Opinion

Rejection at an Early Age

By CAMERON STRACHER APRIL 15, 1999

The letters arrived last week, quick and cutting. "We regret to inform you," they began. Harvard, Yale, Princeton? No, this was nursery school, and our son had not been admitted. He was waitlisted, actually, at four schools and rejected at one.

My wife and I told ourselves we would not take it to heart; after all, we had been warned by friends that the admissions process was nasty, brutish and short. But that night the tears began, as did the recriminations. We should have fed him before his interview at Metropolitan Montessori. I should have attended the open house at Mandell. We both should have looked for a fall-back school.

It was not our fault, the letters claimed; classes were oversubscribed and competition was fierce. But it was hard not to wonder why the schools had not seen our perfect baby boy as perfectly as we saw him. Perhaps he was a little immature. Perhaps he did not "separate" well. Perhaps he just wasn't ready for the rigors of nursery school.

But by the next day our doubts had evaporated, replaced by a growing outrage. Little things fueled it -- we noticed, for instance, that the letter from one school referred to Simon as "your daughter." The letter from another called him "Shaina."

We asked ourselves how a school could judge whether a 2 1/2-year-old would be mature enough to play with Legos in six months' time, given how quickly children change. We remembered the absurd process of two interviews (one for the child, one for the parents), a school tour and an open house -- everything but a drug test and a security clearance.

Most of all we realized that despite the hassles of living in New York City -- the cramped spaces, the high cost of living, the crazy people -- what eventually would drive us to the suburbs were the schools: the inadequacy of the city's public schools, the high cost of the private ones and the destructive competition that begins as early as nursery school and continues through kindergarten to high school. We can live with the traffic, the noise, the pollution. What we can never live with is explaining to our 2 1/2-year-old that he was waitlisted at nursery school.

We'll let his S.A.T. tutor break the news.

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