Achievement pressure—it’s off the charts. Here’s what educators can do to work with achievement-obsessed parents and bring balance back to school.
The
Overpressured
Student

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It's early evening, and I'm speaking to a group of about 40 parents at a high-powered independent school with a stunning record for sending students to prestigious colleges. The topic is moral development. One reason I've been asked to speak is concern among both faculty members and parents that the school's intense focus on academic achievement has squeezed out attention to other crucial aspects of kids' lives.

About 15 minutes into my talk, a hand shoots up, and a parent says, "I agree with you that it's important for kids to be good people, but, realistically, that won't help my child get into a place like Harvard." Another parent quips, "Can you change Harvard so that being a good person counts in the application?" Many parents in the audience laugh nervously. But other parents are on the edge of their seats. How much should they focus on their child being good? And will it help their child get accepted at a prestigious school?

Overboard on Achievement

Increasingly in recent years I've heard stories about students in independent schools and wealthy suburban schools who are strung-out achievement junkies and about parents who drive them relentlessly. Wealthy parents are, of course, easy targets. They seem to have no excuses and few defenders.

In fact, I've found many parents in these schools who have entirely healthy attitudes about their children's achievements—parents who are simply trying to fathom the mystery of what will help their children thrive. And I've met many kind, emotionally healthy, and well-grounded children in these schools. Images in popular culture of rich kids as morally imbecilic, trust fund–pampered, Porsche-driving vipers are as wildly off target as are stereotypes of marauding, gun-toting, crack-addled poor black and Latino kids.

But the fact remains: When it comes to academic achievement, many parents in upper- and middle-class communities have gone overboard. Parents are now going to legendary lengths to prime the mental engines of infants and toddlers—one-third of U.S. children have seen a Baby Einstein video (Quart, 2006). Some parents not only become paramilitary when it comes to securing selective preschool slots, but also procure tutors for their preschool children (Fuchs, 2002). And when college looms on the horizon, the true madness begins. As an Atlantic Monthly article observed, "Millions of families are now in a state of nervous collapse regarding college admissions," and large numbers of kids are in terror that if they don't get into a high-profile college, their life is "ruined" (Easterbrook, 2004, p. 128).

In a study that my research team conducted at an independent school, more than one-third of the 40 juniors surveyed identified "getting into a good college" as more important than "being a good person," and nearly one-half of students said that it was more important to their parents that they get into a good college than that they be good people. When I shared these data with the school, a few teachers protested vehemently. They thought the numbers were far too low.

But the trouble is not simply parents. Many schools—independent and suburban schools especially—stoke achievement pressure. I recently spoke to a group of independent school teachers and administrators, and one teacher said,

Every particle of our schools is now devoted to students achieving at a high level and getting into one of these prestigious schools. It's crazy! We should blow ourselves up and start all over again.
Numerous heads nodded in assent.

The point is not, of course, that parents or teachers should stop putting pressure on children to achieve. It’s entirely possible for children to achieve stratospherically and, at the same time, lead full, gratifying, and moral lives.

The point is that we’re out of balance. Achievement has, in many cases, become the chief goal of child-raising—and this intense focus threatens to make children both less happy and less moral. The point is also that parents, schools, and communities all have vital roles to play in curbing destructive forms of achievement pressure and in cultivating healthy notions of achievement.

The Emotional and Moral Toll

Take 22-year-old Sara, who was, according to her therapist, “a performance machine.” Her parents were afraid of what would happen if she didn’t do well in everything she did. The therapist told me,

I don’t think she was ever able to figure out what she wanted. She was angry, adrift, and empty, and she didn’t know why. The work of therapy is very slowly helping her start over and figure out what she wants, who she is. She’s having to go back and create a self.

Research by Columbia University psychologists Suniya Luthar and Shawn Latendresse (2005) suggests something striking and troubling: Even though poor children face many hardships, teenagers in affluent families suffer emotional and moral problems at roughly the same rates. The causes of these troubles clearly differ in rich and poor communities, as do the consequences. Yet affluent children suffer high rates of behavioral problems; delinquency; drug use (including hard drugs); anxiety; and depression (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). One study of 144 girls in an affluent northeastern high school revealed that these girls were two to three times more likely to report clinical levels of depression than the general population of teens (Luthar & D’Avanzo, 1999). Although there are, to be sure, many complex causes of behavioral and emotional problems, researchers point to a strong association between these troubles and achievement pressures.

Children with “very high perfectionist strivings—those who saw achievement failures as personal failures” (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005) are more at risk, as are children whose parents value their accomplishments more than aspects of their character. Ironically, this pressure is not even likely to achieve what it’s intended to achieve. Research suggests that children who are subjected to intense achievement pressure by their parents don’t outperform other students (Luthar & Becker, 2002).

Overpressured . . .

Children often feel the most heat to achieve—and, more important, develop their understandings of what high achievement is and why it’s important—from their parents. The damage wrought by a small but not trivial fraction of parents is obvious.

Some parents fail to model a basic sense of fairness. It’s not rare in some affluent communities for parents to get a psychiatrist to falsely diagnose their child as having attention deficit disorder so he or she can petition for extended time on the SATs.

Some parents fuel a community service olympics, a race to see which parent can secure the most high-profile community service opportunity for their child. We interviewed the parents of one high school junior who had set up a vocational school in an African country so their daughter could say in her college application that she had started a school in a developing country.

I’ve heard about parents paying jaw-dropping amounts of money—several thousand dollars a year—for SAT tutors, beginning when their children are in 5th grade. At least one private college counselor in New York rakes in as much as $40,000 per child for helping students secure slots in selective colleges (Berkfield & Tergesen, 2007).

And Undervalued

Yet this damage is far less pervasive than the harm done to children by parents who intensely promote their children’s achievements in more quiet and often unexamined ways. When parents treat children like performance machines or place their children’s academic achievement above other values—for example, regularly pressing their children to take courses and participate in extracurricular activities in which they have no interest because it will help them get into good colleges, constantly arranging achievement-boosting activities, or pushing them to apply to prestigious colleges where they are unlikely to fit in and thrive—children not only are stressed but also may feel that their best personal qualities are not valued by others.

A child who is socially skilled, deeply loyal, funny, feisty, caring, and imagi-
Conflicting Messages

Many parents and teachers send contradictory messages about achievement. Some students complain that school staff members frequently, as one suburban high school student put it, “give lip service” to character, “but when it comes down to it, all they really care about is our grades.”

Some young people see their parents as simply fooling themselves about how much achievement really matters to them. Students pick up on the contradiction when parents say they don’t care whether their kids go to prestigious colleges as long as they’re happy—but then pay staggering amounts of money for SAT tutors, send them to independent schools where getting into high-status colleges is the holy grail, or visibly glow when talking about certain top schools. When parents or teachers say that students should go to prestigious schools so they’ll have the option of becoming a doctor, lawyer, or corporate leader, some students sense the contradiction. They’re not really being given options to enter a whole array of lower-status careers—whether in teaching, forestry, carpentry, or firefighting—that may be more aligned with their own passions.

Further, although some children flourish under intense competitive pressure, in our research in the independent school many children poignantly described their stresses and struggles to be honest, generous, and caring when achievement pressure and competition became fierce.

Research suggests that children subjected to intense achievement pressure by their parents don’t outperform other students.

For example, one student with a low grade point average noted that he felt he had to lie about it so students wouldn’t look down on him. Another admitted to behaving like “a jerk” because of the intense stress. Added another, “Kids here get obsessed with grades and forget about friends.”

How Schools Can Work with Parents

There’s no single, healthy approach to promoting children’s achievement—largely because how parents and teachers think about achievement may be rooted in widely different values concerning money, status, and accomplishment. Yet schools can work to curb destructive forms of achievement pressure and help parents interact more constructively with their children around achievement.

Send Red Flags

Schools might send home guidelines or “red flags” that make parents aware of specific feelings or actions that may signal that parental achievement pressure is out of control. When parents’ self-esteem plummets when a child does poorly on a big test or is rejected by an elite private school, when interactions with a child are consumed by achievement talk, when parents assess their child’s competition by asking who in the cohort gets the best grades or is applying to what colleges—these are red flags.

It should also be a red flag when parents find themselves popping vocabulary flash cards at the dinner table, saying “we are applying” to a college, or peppering college-admissions officers with questions while their child stands sullenly by as though facing incarceration. It should certainly be a red flag when children show signs of debilitating stress, such as not eating or sleeping well, as a result of academic pressure (Abeles & Congdon, 2009).

In her lectures, psychologist and author Wendy Mogel urges parents to stick to a 20-minute rule (see Bazelon, 2006)—spend no more than 20 minutes a day “thinking about your child’s education or worrying about your child, period.” Except in those cases in which a child is having a significant academic or emotional problem, that’s a good rule.

Encourage Honest Conversations

Schools might guide parents in having honest, constructive conversations with their kids about achievement. Large numbers of parents may underestimate what a relief it would be to their children—and how much it would support their children’s maturity and secure their respect and trust—if they...
stopped bobbing and weaving and had more honest talk.

If parents are miserable when a child doesn't get into a prestigious school, they might say to their child quite openly that, in their more mature moments, they know that one can flourish in many colleges and that their disappointment is their own problem, something they need to work on. Parents might tell their own stories about the positive and negative ways their own families handled achievement.

Prompt Parents to Reflect
It will not be easy for many parents to convey to children that academic achievement is only one theme in the large composition of a life or to be vigilant about the many troubling signals they send their children about achievement. It may mean wading into the muck of themselves and coming to terms with their own feelings about achievement.

Legions of parents have never thought about how their own views about their children's achievements are connected to the ways their parents handled achievement. Nor have they recognized the many irrational forces that drive them to push their children academically. These forces include the hope that their children will live out the parents' dreams or compensate for their own shortcomings; the belief that their children's achievements are a public reflection of their success as parents; their status concerns and feelings of competitiveness with other parents; the unconscious script in their heads, written in their childhoods, that says that achievement is the only way to secure love—a kind of tragic condition that can be passed from generation to generation with consequences worthy of the ancient Greeks. In her book *Hothouse Kids: The Dilemma of the Gifted Child*, author Alissa Quart points out that some parents are simply terrified of their children being “ordinary” (see Tsing Loh, 2006, p. 116).

Schools might prompt parents to reflect on all these forces. In the end, some parents simply need “to grieve,” as one parent put it, that their children will not go to high-status colleges, land prestigious fellowships, or have turbo-charged careers.

How Schools Can Find Balance
Although almost all schools claim they promote not only students' achievement but also their social, emotional, and moral growth, schools could do a great deal more to match their rhetoric with reality. Some schools, like Beaver Country Day School outside Boston, have set out, as Peter Gow, the head of college counseling, puts it, to “defang” achievement pressure by creating a counteridentity (Smith, 2011). Unlike nearby independent schools, Beaver advertises itself as a school that gives equal weight to social, emotional, and ethical development and aligns its practices with these priorities. Beaver has, for example, created an upper-school schedule that is far less frenetic for students than the schedule in most high-powered high schools, allowing for longer class periods to stimulate deeper exploration of materials as well as significant time in the day for students to relax and reflect.

More modestly, schools might limit the number of advanced placement (AP) and honors courses students can take and strongly encourage students to limit extracurricular activities to those that really interest them. Schools might focus both on reducing homework and on making homework more meaningful, especially given research indicating that homework typically has little value (Kohn, 2006).

They could also far more forcefully elevate the value of a range of careers. School guidance counselors and teachers should emphasize choosing a college on the basis of whether it’s the right fit rather than on the basis of status. They might also encourage students to take a gap year before college as a way of discovering their passions.

Just as important, schools should make high achievement only one of many ways of measuring how students value themselves, if for no other reason than that many students will never achieve at a high level in comparison with their peers. That means not only providing students with various opportunities in the arts, sports, and community service. It also means taking on the deep work of cultivating in the school a rich and nuanced view of human nature and finding ways to value students for their many qualities: their contributions to the community; their ability to tune in to others; their excitement about learning; and how deeply they value those who differ from themselves in race, class, or gender.

Schools, along with parents, can take...
on the vital and delicate task of helping children uncover what’s meaningful to them so they’re not just achieving to achieve or to please their parents or teachers. Psychologist Charles Ducey told me that when college students who are wound up about achievement discover what’s meaningful to them, the anguish around achievement often disappears.

Before children’s lives become jam-packed with résumé-building activities, parents, guidance counselors, and teachers can engage in the complex choreography of leading and following with children. They can guide children toward potentially meaningful activities and experiences and pay careful attention to what resonates with them. They can listen to children in a relaxed way without an agenda, reflect back their understandings, and share their knowledge of the world.

It Takes a Village
Ultimately, decelerating achievement pressure may require a collective response. Achievement pressure is an escalating contagion: Schools often compete and ramp one another up, and parents feed off one another. If a neighbor’s child has an SAT tutor in 8th grade, a parent might feel he’s cheating his 8th grader if he doesn’t get her a tutor. As one parent I spoke with put it, “It’s incredibly competitive out there, and I don’t want my child left in the dust.” It is, in a sense, a public health problem.

That means it’s hard for any one parent or school to act solo. Parents and schools need to regulate and police one another. Parents in a community who are wound up about achievement discover what’s meaningful to them, the anguish around achievement often disappears.

Achievement pressure is an escalating contagion.
It is, in a sense, a public health problem.

Journalist Sandra Tsing Loh (2006) suggests that college students themselves may soon rebel against all this pressure: “This era’s needed cultural statement may well be kids joyously burning U.S. News and World Report college rankings” (p. 118). But wouldn’t it be better if we adults took serious action first?

As parents and teachers, we have been fantastically successful at getting children to buy into our achievement ethic. It’s an awesome tribute to our power. But is this really the way we want to use our power? If we’re serious about both our children’s happiness and their moral growth, then we’ll have to see that too many of us have caught a fever. We can wait for children to end this contagion, or we can seek to heal ourselves.

Author’s note: Alexis Brooke-Redding assisted with this article, which was adapted from my book The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children’s Moral and Emotional Development (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

References

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