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AGES & STAGES

When the Pressure to Excel Gets Out of Hand

To America's teenagers, adulthood must seem like a comparative vacation. They match us step-for-step during the day, then wade through an hour or two of homework at night. If it seems like youngsters are under fiercer pressures than in your day, you're not imagining things. They are.



"It's a national phenomenon," says Dr. Coleman, who points to two causes. In an increasingly high-tech economy, more will be demanded of tomorrow's workers. As teachers are constantly reminding their classes, they will need superior skills if they expect to land a job. That is, if there are any jobs left, a worry generated by the downsizing trend of recent years.

The pressure to achieve is partly self-imposed, notes Dr. Coleman, but it comes mostly from Mom and Dad. "Teenage patients of mine will complain, 'My parents are putting so much pressure on me to get into a good college that I can't even have fun as a sophomore in high school.' Parents can get very revved up. I've had couples bring in an eight-year-old because she wasn't doing well in spelling. They wanted to know whether or not she'd be able to get into college, be independent and have a good life.

"Some of their concerns are justified," he continues, "but other times they're focused too far ahead and not on keeping their youngster's life balanced *now*."

What You Can Do

Watch carefully for signs of strain. You can't put a number on how many extracurricular commitments are too many. A girl's schedule may resemble the queen of England's social calendar, but if she appears happy and is doing well, then her parents can relax. (Incidentally, research suggests that participating in after-school activities may strengthen students' affection for their schools, which is associated with lower failure rates and dropout rates.)

A youngster who is feeling overwhelmed may seem irritable, depressed or exhausted. Her schoolwork may suffer. "When you notice consistent signs of stress," says clinical psychologist Helen Pratt, a mother of five, "it's time to step in and insist that the teenager give up one or more of her activities."

Examine your expectations for your child. Are they realistic? To demand that a perennial *D* student in science suddenly start pulling *A*'s in eleventh grade chemistry is not only unreasonable but may very well set her up for failure and discouragement.

A better way is to measure progress in small increments. So although our ultimate aim may be to raise her grade to a *B* by semester's end, we institute short-term goals along the way. Perhaps the first stepping-stone is to help her understand a key concept. Acknowledge this step forward and offer encouragement for the next landmark: a *B* on a forthcoming lab test. And so on. If she falls short, examine why. Was it due to a lack of effort? Or was the bar set too high? If the latter, then the goals need to be reconsidered.

Don't insist on college if your child is determined not to go. You can make a compelling case that attending college will give him a competitive edge, but ultimately the decision is his. Perhaps he's never been academically inclined. Or perhaps he wants to dive directly into the job market, enlist in the armed forces or pursue a field where education is secondary to a particular talent, like acting or athletics.

As long as a youngster has a plan—even if it's short term or not the ambition you would have chosen for him—we'd advise against pressuring him to go to college against his will. All of us progress through life at our own pace and according to our own timetable. Some teenagers know from a young age what they want to do professionally; their career path resembles an arrow's flight, straight and true. Others set their sights on one career but abandon the dream once they achieve it or at some point along the way. Perhaps it was someone *else's* vision for them more so than their own. Eventually they discover that their heart lies somewhere else.

Then there are the many young people who don't come into their own until later in life. They may try their hand at working for a few years, *then* go to college. Maybe they've found their true calling and now want to develop the skills to make a career out of it. Or, their experience in the workforce has taught them to appreciate the advantages of that diploma. Our point is that it's never too late to go back to school. With future generations expected to have two, three or more careers in their lifetime, many adults will no doubt find themselves back in the classroom.

A high-schooler who can't bear the thought of spending four more years in school might consider obtaining an associate of arts degree (A.A.) at a two-year institution. Those armed with an A.A. will find more welcome mats out when looking for a job and higher salaries than if they never went to college at all. Another timesaving option is to enroll in a technical program to obtain the skills and experience sought by employers.

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