

The Hidden Perils Of Our High Achievement Culture

What can be done about the stress we parents put upon our kids considering the recent headlines about teenagers in such distress about school?

Today's emphasis upon expecting so much output from children and teenagers, ostensibly to help them find their passions and carve their future path, has led to an unintended consequence: a generation of stressed out kids. The pressure of accelerated classes, afterschool activities, community involvements, and family obligations takes its toll upon sleep, mood, self-concept and relationships with friends and family members. Rather than feeling parental support and encouragement, students feel pushed, misunderstood, and measured by parents. Some lash out about their stress while others suffer silently as the achievement race turns them into providers of productivity. This latter group is especially at risk for psychological problems since they train themselves early to hide their pain, and in so doing, place themselves at risk for serious emotional problems.

If this predicament is familiar read on for ways to help your child achieve a balanced perspective of life:

Take responsibility for the explicit or implicit messages you have been sending about the value of achievement. As parents speak of grades, activities, awards and honors, some kids interpret that to mean that 'more is better' and don't feel empowered to express their own feelings and opinions about their parents' expectations. A self-fulfilling dynamic ensues wherein parents may perceive their kids as thriving on 'being so busy' while their kids perceive their parents as 'being so proud of how busy I am,' and reluctantly accept that 'achievement pressure is good pressure.' Parents should consider that their children's seeming external acceptance may hide an internal state of painful anxiety and thoughts of discontentment. Encourage them to talk about their displeasure without fear of parent disapproval.

Validate your child's expression of their feelings and carefully listen to their view of achievement. Probe how much pressure they feel and how they think it affects their sleep, mood, and self-view. See if they observe achievement pressure in classmates and whether friends have commented on how they show it. Provide examples such as over-reactions to a less than stellar grade, punishing themselves for an academic mistake or oversight, allowing achievement to be the major measure of how they feel about themselves, or unnecessarily making an academic task harder for themselves just to demonstrate greater excellence. Explain how these examples drain quality of life and show how they are allowing achievement to equal self-worth, a dangerous equation to take into their future.

Emphasize the importance of bringing more balance to their life in the form of rewarding oneself, ensuring they make time for relaxation, and pursuing interests not tied to achievement. Explain how having a 'worker personality' can make for plenty of accomplishments but also pulls us onto the next productive path that seems unending at times. The line between pursuing achievement and being consumed by the pursuit can be hard to find and sometimes is indistinguishable to the person in pursuit. If appropriate and fitting, reveal your own struggles to manage the worker demands you place upon yourself, and how just talking about the problem is one step toward replacing worker self-talk with balanced thinking.

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