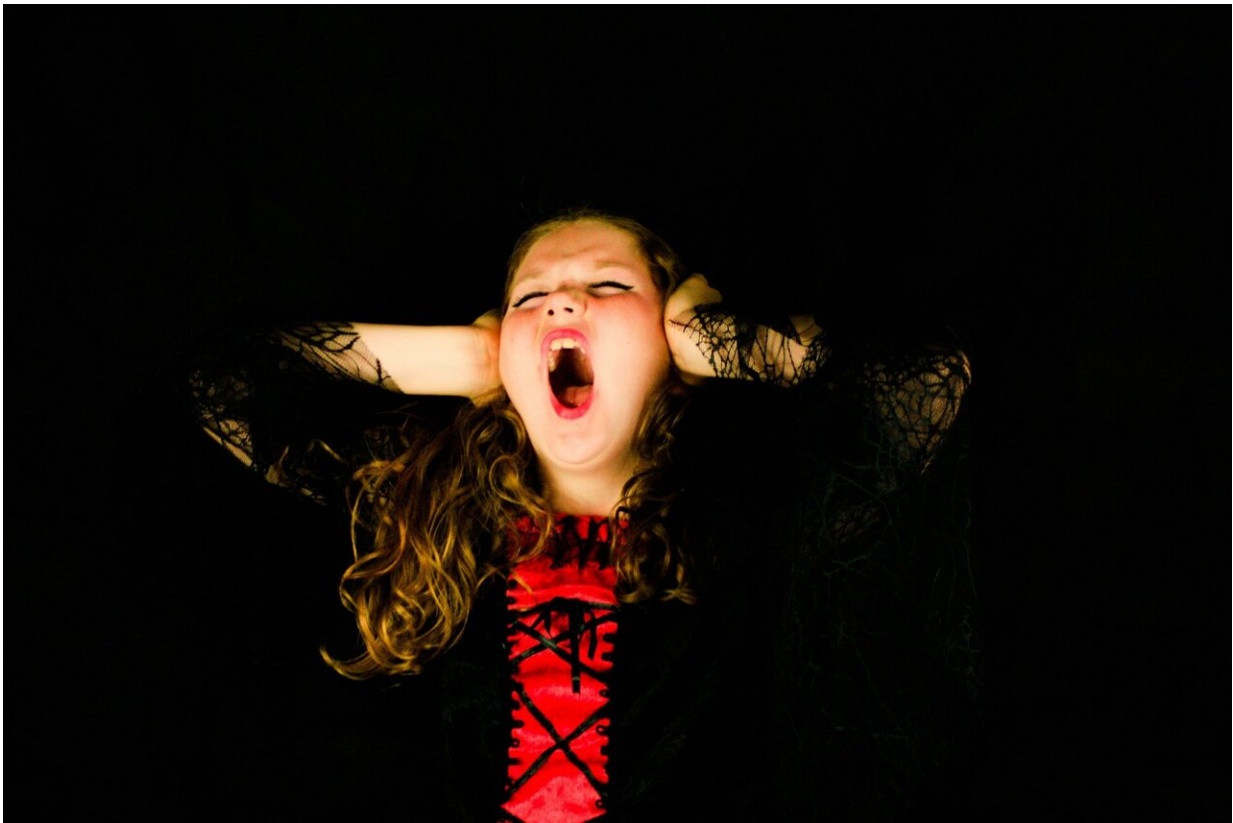


Q&A: How achievement pressure is crushing kids and what to do about it

September 12 2023, by Samantha Laine Perfas



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Are we pushing our kids too much? This is a complicated question, and one that many parents struggle to answer.

Parenting has always been a balancing act of trying to encourage children to succeed without pressing so hard they buckle under the pressure. In recent years adolescents have been struggling with alarming rates of anxiety and depression, leaving [parents](#) more worried than ever about their children's well-being.

So are parents to blame? Not exactly, says Jennifer Breheny Wallace '94, an award-winning journalist, who recently published The New York Times bestseller "Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About It."

In her book, she talks about the pressure to succeed that adolescents face today. This can come from parents, who serve as conduits for wider cultural anxieties, such as growing income inequalities and job market competitiveness triggered by globalism and economic shifts. But parents aren't the only factor; students encounter pressures at school, various activities, and interactions with peers and various others.

Breheny Wallace spoke with the Gazette about what she found in her research—and offers parents advice on how to offer their children more effective emotional support. This interview was edited for clarity and length.

Gazette: You start the book with Molly, a high school junior. Tell me a little bit about her, and why her story stuck with you.

Breheny Wallace: What was so compelling about her was that she presented herself as a very balanced student. She shared that many of her friends would go to bed at 3 a.m. or wake up at 3 a.m., so without any irony, she told me that because she wasn't a night person she was in bed by midnight, most nights, and then up again at 5 a.m. to finish things up

and go to sports practice.

I said, "You're a varsity athlete. How do you do it?" And again, without any irony, she was like, "Yeah, I just run the practice with my eyes closed." As though this is normal. This is what students do, and it struck me that she did not see it as abnormal at all. She internalized the expectations, and she was living them.

Gazette: Your book highlights the pressure that students, like Molly, face when they attend so-called "high-achieving schools," schools that tend to be very competitive, with high standardized test scores. Why did you decide to focus on this demographic?

Breheny Wallace: As you point out, yes, many of these students come from the top 25 percent of household incomes. Depending on where you live, that's a household income of roughly \$130,000 a year. That could be a family with parents who are both teachers; we're not talking about the 1 percent. We're talking about upper middle-class families.

In 2019, I wrote an article for The Washington Post about two national policy reports that found these students to be—officially—an at-risk group, meaning they were two to six times more likely to suffer from clinical levels of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorder than the average American teen. It felt so counterintuitive that [kids](#) who are given so many opportunities would be doing less well—in tangible measures of well-being—than middle-class peers. And what is happening to these kids is happening to all kids throughout the country.

This "never enough" feeling is felt everywhere. I'm not saying resources should be diverted from other demographics to address this issue; these parents and schools are well-resourced and can afford to provide what's

necessary to help their kids. But I think it's important to remember that pain and empathy are not zero sum. As one researcher said to me, "No child chooses their circumstances." And as the adults in their lives, it's our job to do something about it.

Gazette: The book talks a lot about achievement pressure, which leads to this 'never enough' feeling. What is it, and how do you see it affecting young people?

Breheny Wallace: To be clear, I am not against achievement. I am ambitious myself, and I get so much joy out of achieving; I want my kids to feel that joy too. Where achievement becomes toxic is when we tangle up our entire sense of self and value with our achievements. When you have to achieve in order to matter.

That achievement pressure is felt by students today, and they are feeling it from every direction: from parents who just want what's best for their kids; from teachers who are under their own pressures to hit certain standards; and schools both public and private that are under their own pressures to perform.

We're already seeing the effects this pressure has on youth. We have a devastating epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and suicide; we are seeing a generation that is being crushed.

Gazette: One misperception about achievement pressure is that it comes from parents prioritizing success over the children's happiness, or that parents are trying to live vicariously through their children. What's actually happening?

Breheny Wallace: I wrote this book because I was really tired of the narrative that parents today just want logos on the backs of their cars. I wasn't buying it. The roots of this achievement pressure are so much deeper. I spoke with historians, economists, and sociologists, and while there have been a few trends over time, the ones that really resonated with me were the macro-economic forces at play for parents today.

When I was growing up in the '70s and early '80s, life was generally more affordable in every way: housing, higher education, health care, even our food. My parents could be relatively assured, as generations were in the past, that even with some wrong moves, I could replicate my childhood, if not do even better.

But today's parents face a different reality. We are now seeing the first generation that's not doing as well as their parents did. They're saddled with debt. They can't afford real estate; health care bills are bankrupting people. So parents are feeling this deep inequity that's now in our culture; the crush of the middle class and the hyper competition that comes from globalization.

And in the words of researchers, we're becoming the social conduits of these macro-economic forces. We're passing on the fears and anxieties about such an unknown future to our kids in the way we parent. Because we are sensing fewer and fewer guarantees for our kids, we feel tasked with weaving individualized safety nets for our children. While it's always been the job of parents to raise the next generation, it's never felt so fraught.

Gazette: Do you have any examples of this?

Breheny Wallace: With the help of a researcher at Harvard Graduate School of Education, I conducted my own parenting survey of 6,500

parents across the country. I asked parents how much they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "I feel responsible for my children's achievement and success." Seventy-five percent of parents said they somewhat or strongly agreed.

And then I asked how much they agreed with this statement: "Others think that my children's academic success is a reflection of my parenting." Eighty-three percent of parents either strongly or somewhat agreed with that statement.

And then the last statement I asked: "I wish today's childhood was less stressful for my kids." And 87 percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed.

Gazette: You, along with many of our readers, are Ivy League graduates. Did you notice similarities or differences between your experience and that of adolescents today?

Breheny Wallace: I was stunned by how different my experience was than the students whom I interviewed. When I was growing up, achievement was important to my family. But it didn't define my life. It was just as important as my relationship with my family and extended family. Yes, my debate tournaments were important. But so was spending time with my grandparents and my aunts and uncles. I had a healthy, balanced childhood, and my sense of self was not defined by my achievements.

In the words of [HGSE and Kennedy School lecturer] Richard Weissbourd of Making Caring Common, parents sometimes see college as a life vest in a sea of uncertainty. Parents are getting fixated on college brands and prestige, hoping that just sticking that brand-name

college life vest on will help our kids despite whatever comes their way in the future.

But unfortunately, what I found in my research is that very life vest is becoming a lead vest and drowning many of the kids we're trying to protect. As parents, we need to rethink that strategy. It's not the prestige of a college that matters; it's how students fit into their environment and feel valued in a meaningful way.

Gazette: As a parent, how do you hold your child to a high standard without putting so much pressure on them that it hurts their well-being?

Breheny Wallace: This was a lesson I learned from Suniya Luthar, who was one of the world's leading researchers on resilience before she passed away. And she said that students today are saturated with messages about performance in their classrooms, with their peers, teachers, colleges, social media, and the larger culture. They are hearing messages day in and day out that they have to strive; they have to do better; and that they're only as good as their next accomplishment. So home needs to be a haven from that pressure, where our kids can recover, and where their value is never in question.

Gazette: Was there anything that surprised you while writing this book?

Breheny Wallace: According to a decade's worth of resilience research, the No. 1 intervention for any child in distress is to make sure that their primary caregivers are OK. Parents need to make sure their well-being, their social support system, and their mental health are intact, because a child's resilience rests fundamentally on the resilience of the adults in their lives. And adult resilience rests fundamentally on their

relationships.

Parents are sold this bill of goods to just take a bubble bath, drink this delicious tea, download this meditation app. But while those are great stress reducers, they are not going to give the resilience needed to be the first responders to our kids' struggles.

And the only way we are going to do that is by nurturing relationships outside of the home for the benefit of the people within the home. When I was a young mother, I really thought my role was to be as perfect as I could be. And what I've realized instead is that my kids are served better less by trying to be perfect, and more by just trying to be that steady presence.

Gazette: What do children, particularly adolescents, need most from their parents?

Breheeny Wallace: In my research, I sought out the "healthy strivers," the students who were able to achieve success in healthy ways. What it boiled down to was that these kids felt a deep sense of mattering. They felt deeply valued for who they were by their family, by their friends, and by their community separate from their external achievements.

The kids who were struggling the most felt like their mattering was contingent on their performance; that their parents only valued or cared about them when they were performing. Or, for other kids who weren't doing well, they heard those messages from their parents, but they were never expected to add value back to anyone other than themselves; these kids lacked social proof that they mattered.

For parents, I'd focus on a phrase from Suniya Luthar, the resilience [researcher](#): "Minimize criticism. Prioritize affection." Find ways to let

your kids know that they matter, separate from their achievements.

This story is published courtesy of the [Harvard Gazette](#), Harvard University's official newspaper. For additional university news, visit [Harvard.edu](#).

Provided by Harvard Gazette

Citation: Q&A: How achievement pressure is crushing kids and what to do about it (2023, September 12) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-qa-pressure-kids.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.