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Pushy Parents and Their Effect on Today’s Youth

As time goes on, the world gets more complicated. Preschools require interviews; entry level jobs require years of experience; colleges are harder to get into. College admissions not only look for a spectacular academic record but for extracurricular activities too. Parents have awareness of this, and look towards their children’s future. Therefore, they push their children as much as possible in order to build their high school resumes. Pushing and pushing and pushing; will this ever backfire? How will raising the bar so high affect the mindset of today’s youth? Many kids flatline once they hit a certain age, unwilling to take chances and unable to continue to grow mentally. The conditioning they experienced in their childhood glues them to a fixed mindset instead of the ideal growth mindset. They are terrified to mess up and fail to live up to their parents’ high expectations as well as their own. Pushing children as much as possible, instead of securing successful futures for them, ends up overwhelming them and defining them by their academic success.

Many kids join clubs and activities not because they are interested in them but to satisfy the expectations of their parents and college admission officers. They take too-difficult classes not to challenge themselves but because they know it will look good on a college application. Emphasis is heaped on academics until kids believe it is their only worth. I know too many people who have always been straight-A students and cried the first time they got a B in a class. I feel ashamed when I score anything lower than a 93 on a test because I am supposed to be smart. Once I got to high school and started taking challenging classes, I felt I could not keep up because I had no clue how to study effectively since I had never had to do it before. The experience is similar to kayaking on Class V whitewater rapids for the first time and realizing too late that you never learned how to roll over or execute a wet exit. Academic excellence is so highly prized by parents and college admissions officers that it can be toxic. Take the concept of National Honors Society - selecting only the smartest students and telling them they are the elite of their generation. It lauds those who meet the academic threshold and demeans those who do not.  Parents pile expectations for school and extracurricular activities onto kids yet it never occurs to them what the ill effects of doing so may be.

Children grow up thinking that academic success is what defines them. Their parents teach them that intelligence is an inherent quality and praise them for their intelligence to encourage them to work harder. However, kids who are told they are smart and above average throughout their childhood sit back and relax because they learned that they can put forth no effort and still be better than their peers. They make the assumption that everyone has a fixed level of intelligence and that theirs will always be higher. This fixed mindset cripples them once they hit high school. They struggle to grow academically. For example, my friend who was placed in Math 1 as a sixth grader now gets C’s in her high school math classes; due to her fixed mindset, she does not know how to study and grow academically while others are catching up with her and surpassing her abilities.

Parents coddle and praise children for their achievements and constantly push them to do better and achieve more. Parents are led to believe these behaviors and expectations boost their children's self-esteem and groom them to be prosperous adults. They sign their kids up for all kinds of activities with the belief that doing so will broaden their horizons and help them develop into well-rounded adults. Instead, kids get overwhelmed with everything their parents enroll them in. They are so overscheduled that they stress out and cannot focus or do well on any of the activities, including their academic studies.

How can we nurture children instead of pressuring them to always be the best? How can we support intellectual advancement in children without changing the way they view themselves and the world? How can we raise well-rounded children without overwhelming and overscheduling them? A different parenting approach is needed. Teach children it is okay to make mistakes and that they do not have to excel academically in every class. Praise children for effort rather than their intelligence when they are younger. Nurture intellectually advanced children without isolating them and crippling them. Encourage kids to develop good study habits early on, before they will need them. Only schedule kids for things they have time for and are genuinely interested in. Lower your expectations and cultivate a growth mindset.