

## **Questionable Values: Why Add More Stress and Pressure on Our Children?**

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In 2011 I wrote a three-part website series about the documentary “Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America’s Achievement Culture.” This documentary was created and directed by Vicki Abeles who noted that its production was triggered “by a series of wake-up calls that made me look closely at the relentless pressure to perform that children face today,” including her 12-year-old daughter being diagnosed with stress induced illness.

Abeles observed, “After months of long evenings battling homework assignments, studying for tests and panic attacks in the middle of the night, we found our daughter doubled over in pain, and rushed her to the emergency room. Her cheerful façade and determination to keep up had masked her symptoms to us, to her friends, and to her teachers.”

In my three articles, I described the intense stress and pressure experienced by many of our youth in their quest to be “successful”—success typically measured by obtaining high grades, being accepted for admission to so-called elite colleges, and eventually gaining high-paying positions in the workplace accompanied by all of the trappings that go with a six-figure or higher income.

I challenged these criteria for success held by many adults and their teens, and also questioned what I considered to be unproven myths that added to stress, including that grades and test scores are the foundation for future accomplishment and that there is a correlation between the amount of homework given and achievement in school. Please refer to my April, May, and June, 2011 articles for a more detailed discussion of these topics.

I received many responses to these articles both via e-mail and during workshops I gave for parents and educators. Most educators echoed what I have been hearing for years, namely, that they have observed a noticeable increase in the stress displayed by today’s youth. While many parents concurred with what the teachers reported, some still

held on to the two myths I highlighted in my articles even as their children continued to be burdened by worry and stress.

### **An Increase in Stress?**

I am frequently asked if the stress displayed by today's youth is of greater magnitude than that witnessed in previous generations. Certainly, earlier generations of children and adolescents were not immune from stress, especially prior to the emergence of child labor laws and other edicts to protect our children. I remember while growing up in the 1950s the anxieties that many in my age group felt as adults spoke about an inevitable nuclear war with the Soviet Union; their prognostication was reinforced by regular exercises in school to hide under our desks or crouch in hallways in case of a nuclear attack (even as a child I wondered how much protection these actions would afford if a nuclear bomb were dropped on Brooklyn, where I grew up).

Current day pressures are readily evident and seemingly more intense than in the past. In our very fast-paced, technology-driven world many are addicted to their smart phones and other devices. There is little time to relax. On a number of occasions I have observed an entire family at a restaurant, each member with a phone in hand, texting, reading e-mails, or playing a video game; interaction among family members is absent. I believe this disconnectedness contributes to an increase in anxiety, depression, and stress in youngsters, many of whom reside in homes in which their parents display these same emotions. In such households each family member's stress serves to magnify a negative atmosphere that takes its toll on harmonious relationships and effective parenting, and minimizes periods of fun and relaxation.

I reported in earlier articles that there are many situations in which stress is reinforced even at an early age, including academic demands being placed on kindergarten children at the expense of play. We often fail to appreciate the significant amount of learning that transpires while children are involved in play activities.

The issues I discussed in response to "Race to Nowhere" once again came to the forefront in a recent article published in *The Boston Globe*. The article prompted me to think about the summers I spent as a teen. In the description that follows of my sons' and my summer experiences, I am well aware that the world in which I grew up was noticeably different from the world in which my two sons grew up. And given what

appears to be a quantum leap in technology during the past 15-20 years, the world in which my grandchildren are being raised is vastly different in many ways from the childhood worlds of their parents.

I have fond memories of my summers as a teenager. I recall during my high school days working as a “soda jerk” in a store owned by older cousins, of going to the beach at Coney Island for relaxation during days I did not work, of playing stickball or pick-up basketball games with neighborhood friends, and reading science fiction novels—all for fun and enjoyment. Thoughts about strategies to strengthen my SAT scores or my college applications did not enter my mind. I never asked, “Can I include this experience on my college application?” Actually, with hindsight I could have mentioned that once I made a soda fountain drink for a young pitcher on the Brooklyn Dodgers who was several years away from becoming one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history—Sandy Koufax. Perhaps I could have contended on the application that the particular concoction I mixed for Sandy on that day served as the catalyst for his brilliant career. But I digress.

My sons Rich and Doug spent summers during their high school years as counselors at the same camp that they attended when they were children. Based on my own summer enjoyment as a teenager, I was pleased to observe the fun they were having in their camp positions. And they were probably pleased that for two months I didn’t allude to school at all. I think that in addition to the fun they experienced while engaged in various activities first as campers and then as counselors, they also had opportunities to enrich their social skills, their friendships, their sense of responsibility, and their empathy and caring. It is little wonder that as 40 year olds, my sons continue to attend a weekend reunion at their former camp each summer. They have maintained long-term friendships with many of their fellow campers and counselors.

### **College Admissions and High-Stress Summers**

What in *The Boston Globe* article prompted thoughts of *Race to Nowhere* and reflections about my own summers as a teen and those of my sons? The title of this very interesting piece written by Beth Teitell immediately caught my attention: “College Hunt Can Bring High-Stress Summers.” The first sentence explains the meaning of the title.

“Ever since he was an eighth-grader at Sharon Middle School, Shridhar Singh and his parents have planned his summer activities with one goal: getting into college.”

The article continues, “Now a 17-year-old high school senior, Singh has studied electrical engineering at Skidmore College, argued in mock trials at Columbia University, developed apps at MIT, and screened patients for tuberculosis in Thailand.”

I know that what I am going to write next represents walking on a slippery slope, and I truly hope I am not misunderstood. The different summer activities in which Singh participated nurture creativity, problem-solving skills, and caring for others—all very admirable qualities throughout our lives. However, what made me feel somewhat uneasy was the stated goal: getting into college. While the activities may have been commendable, I wonder if their benefit was sacrificed to some extent. Were excitement, purpose, and even passion driven into the background in an attempt to achieve the main goal, namely, to pad one’s college application? I have often expressed the belief, supported by many others, that learning is most effective when both the heart and mind of the learner is touched.

My uneasiness was confirmed by the next sentence in Teitell’s report. “But this past summer, after still more school vacation plans fell through, the National Merit Scholarship finalist with Ivy League dreams mainly hung out with his friends. It was the most stressful vacation of his life.” Singh noted, “My parents were saying, ‘Colleges won’t like the fact that you haven’t done anything this summer,’ and people would always say, ‘You need to do something this summer.’ Occasionally I worried—what if it was true?”

In this instance, stress was induced by hanging out with friends instead of adding to accomplishments on a college application. Hanging out with friends, something I did with regularity and enjoyment during my summers in high school, was associated by Singh as negative behavior! I believe that Singh’s parents certainly are very well-intentioned and loving, but as parents we must consider if the goals and expectations we set for our children and the accompanying strategies we implement to reach these goals are worth the possible costs involved.

(I might add parenthetically that Malcolm Gladwell in his latest thought-provoking book, *David and Goliath*, advances the view that in some instances getting

into one's "reach" or "dream school" may actually backfire in terms of one's long-term plans and happiness. As with his other writings, Gladwell's perspective in his newest book invites reflection and discussion.)

Teitell offers a telling insight. "With college tuition an enormous financial stress for many families, adding pricey summer programs to the tab is something that's out of reach for most people, who see resume-building activities as yet another example of wealthy families trying to buy their children advantages. . . . Summer vacation's changing role—from a time to kick back to a time to learn in—is part of a larger trend that is putting emotional stress on teenagers, a potentially vulnerable population of kids who find themselves under more pressure to succeed than many adults."

### **The Misgivings of Admissions Professionals**

What do admissions professionals think of this trend? Teitell reports that Harvard's dean of admissions has many concerns that are reflected in the University's admission website, urging parents to "Bring summer back with an old fashioned job perhaps, or simply to gather strength for the school year ahead." Similarly, McMillan, Howland, & Spence, a Boston-based educational consulting group, held a staff meeting to consider how to remind parents to relax about their children's college admissions. Firm president Don McMillan states, "We're starting to advise parents to give the kids some time off."

I wish parents and students would adopt this advice, but I think it is an uphill battle to persuade them to do so, especially when one reads other quotes in Teitell's article. She interviewed LeRoy Watkins, co-owner of Viking Sports Camps. Watkins "is bombarded by parents trying to burnish their children's 'leadership' credentials." He notes, "They say, 'We'll pay you whatever my son really needs to be a (counselor in training) for his college application.'" When I read this I couldn't help but think that I do not recall ever advising Rich or Doug that they should be camp counselors so as to have one more accomplishment to cite on their college applications. I can only imagine the response I would have received from my sons if I had made such a statement. Perhaps it would have been, "Cool off, Dad. Can't we do some things just for fun?"

Teitell also mentions Jill Tipograph, founder of the New York-based Everything Summer. Tipograph surveyed admissions staffs at 100 top-rated colleges to gain a

clearer picture of what they are seeking in an applicant. She found that “fancy locales and pricey opportunities are not necessarily what schools are looking for. Colleges are looking for students who use summers to push themselves out of their comfort zones and pursue genuine interests. And they take notice when they see odd experiences that don’t align with anything else.”

I was impressed by the observations of Harvard College admissions and financial aid dean William Fitzsimmons, whom Teitell describes as one of those at the center of the storm in terms of concerns about the pressure being felt by high school students to get into certain colleges. Fitzsimmons worries that “traditional school year overscheduling has now invaded July and August, too.” He argues, “What can be negative is when people lose sight of the fact that it’s important to develop broadly as a human being, as opposed to being an achievement machine. In the end, people will do much better reflecting, perhaps through some down time, in the summer.”

### **Proposed Questions to Ask on a College Application**

As I considered Fitzsimmons’ opinion, I wondered what if every college application contained questions similar to the following:

“What do you do on a regular basis just to relax?”

“Why is it important to have down time?”

“What kind of down time do you have, especially during the summer?”

“Of all of the activities in which you have engaged, which one has brought you the greatest sense of joy and purpose but is not something you planned to include on your college application?”

I think a review of the responses to these questions would prove very revealing and perhaps help adults to understand the factors that contribute to both stress and joy in youth.

In presenting my perspective, I hope I have navigated with some balance what I referred to earlier as a slippery slope. I wouldn’t want my message to be interpreted as advocating that teens not be engaged in some of the same kinds of activities that Singh has been nor that I feel it’s okay for kids to do little, if anything, during the summer months. What I have attempted to express are concerns about our children (a) becoming involved in activities solely for the purpose of adding another experience to their college

applications (I believe that such a goal may actually lessen a sense of purpose, passion, and intrinsic motivation for that activity), and (b) foregoing opportunities to relax, have some down time, and just have periods of fun. Stress, pressure, and even burnout during the teen years are unfortunate occurrences that may have a negative impact for years to come.

**A Comment about “Balance”**

The power of leading a “balanced” life that includes both work and play, that is filled with passion and joy must never be underestimated nor sacrificed on the altar of achievements and accomplishments. Far too often, the seeming benefits of particular achievements and accomplishments may prove transitory at best if they are not associated with purpose, excitement, and happiness. I would argue that seeking experiences primarily for inclusion on one’s college application rather than for enriching one’s life may result in greater anxiety, stress, and a sense of emptiness. All adults, but most especially parents, must consider the benefits and risks when “guiding” (pushing?) our children in a certain direction.

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