

How parental pressure can fuel burnout in college-bound teens

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Anyone who has ever taken the stage to perform or present understands the “butterflies in the stomach” feeling that goes along with the spotlight. This heightened adrenaline serves a purpose, and in the right measure can help us with concentration and focus.

Imagine the exhaustion, however, if that adrenaline rush never went away, and we had to sustain a heightened sense of spotlight indefinitely. For some unfortunate college-bound teens, constant parental pressure is akin to perpetual pre-performance jitters. I have seen it in some of the teens I work with — the averted eyes, the downcast gaze and the sense of defeat that causes shoulders and moods to droop.

Parents, it is hard to know the best way to motivate your teen to do their best, while also giving them the freedom to explore, fail and just be a kid. Read on for a few pro tips on how to tell if the prefix “tiger” belongs in front of your title as Mom or Dad.



Do you have an expectation of perfection?

ents, reflect on the past year of your teenager’s life. What was your reaction, or what would it have been, the last time they brought home a grade that was below an A? Our kids are learning to read the room both socially and academically all day. Perceived hierarchies at school are their unspoken daily reality. Home should be a safe space where they feel loved and accepted unconditionally, and the pressure of the outside world dissipates into a calmer reality.

If teens can’t step away from the grind when they walk in the door at home, their mental health and self-esteem will absolutely suffer. Normalization of sacrificing sleep for academic perfection is not only unhealthy, it will actually cause teens to do worse.

By all means, help your teenager with time management if that is the issue. They should not, however, feel a sense of dread when telling you that they got an A-. If the home environment is a pressure cooker too, change it.

Do you deprive them of opportunities for self-advocacy?

There is nothing like a lesson learned through grit, perseverance and struggle. If you are the parent who is contacting the teacher, academic counselor or coach the minute things don’t go your teen’s way, stop immediately.

High school (and college, for that matter) is about passing the baton of adult life to your child, not prolonging their adolescence by depriving them of the opportunity to solve their problems. Unless the issue has to do with their safety, bow out. Be there for advice, emotional support and example, but let them be the one to act. Your future adult child will thank you.

Are you the driver of their extracurricular interests?

It is important for our teens to be occupied in productive ways when not in the classroom, but if your role as a parent has shifted to cultivating your high-schooler's résumé, please stop. This won't smack of authenticity on your teen's activity list anyway. Yes, you should insist that they do something, but if you are driving them to 6 a.m. practice, two clubs after school, tutoring all evening and homework until 2 a.m., they will not thrive. Allow them space to explore the extracurricular activities they enjoy and are passionate about. Doing a few things deeply and well is what colleges look for.

Teens should have time to socialize, read, be outside and just think. If their extracurricular activities are not enhancing their teenage experience, allow them to do less while choosing the important things that bring them joy.

Today's teens face tremendous pressure, especially those who are bound for highly selective colleges. Parents, please be sure that you are not adding to that and that you allow them to, within reason, drive their own academic destiny. If your actions as a parent are simply driving your child to burnout, it's time to check yourself. You are not, after all, the one going to college. Remember that.



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