

High Achievers: What Price Do They Pay?

Learn to Raise High Achievers Without Breaking Their Spirits

By CARLETON KENDRICK

They come to me with SATs pushing 1600. The valedictorians. The student leaders. The super-jocks. They're applying to Harvard. They're the children you want your kids to become.

For the past 17 years, I've been an alumni interviewer for Harvard. As part of its admissions process, Harvard gives applicants an opportunity to meet with one of its alumni. To personalize the process. To allow its applicants to "come alive," apart from their strategically packaged portfolios.

Acknowledging that most teens walk into these interviews with understandably heightened anxiety, my initial focus is on helping them exhale their fears and worries about impressing me. "We're here so that Harvard can get to know you a little better," I tell them. "There are no right or wrong answers. We're just going to chat for a while."

I try to get beyond their Miss America-like, rehearsed responses. I'm looking for clues as to whether they'd make considerate roommates, inquisitive scholars and generous contributors to Harvard's community. Most often, these frightened, pressured high achievers have trouble finding their own voice. Instead I hear them speak in the success-oriented words of their parents, teachers and college coaches.

Running on Empty

He listed cross-country as a sport he took up in his junior year. No athletic endeavors had preceded his high school running. I asked John (all names have been changed) what had drawn him to distance running. He replied, "My school counselor told me it would look good on my transcript. Time was running out, and my junior year was the last year I could get a sport in before I sent in my

applications. I joined cross-country because everyone makes it who tries out." "Do you like running? Does it give you pleasure?" I asked "No," was his hollow reply.

Peter had scored two 800s on his SATs and was recognized as a National Merit Scholar. I asked whether he had ever challenged any of his English teachers' opinions in class. Looking down at the floor, he spoke softly. "Sure, I used to disagree lots of times. But every time I'd disagree with a teacher of a textbook, I'd get marked down for it. I learned it's better to tell teachers what they want to hear." Sadly, there was no anger or disappointment in his voice.

Sarah, class valedictorian and winner of numerous, prestigious math and science awards, spoke with a dull voice about her academic triumphs and her future. "Math and science have always been easy for me. I don't like them nearly as much as literature, but they're what I do best. I guess I'll major in them in college, get a graduate degree in them and then get an engineering job and get married. That's what my parents expect." Sarah was 17, a broken sparrow, dying to be middle-aged.

Stressed for Success

Heard enough? I have. Over the past two decades, the children I've interviewed have become progressively more packaged for success. They've been advised and scared into believing that school's only purpose is to get the grades that will gain them admission into an elite college. College must then result in a degree that translates into a high-paying job and a secure financial

future. It's no wonder that a recently released American Council on Education survey of more than 348,000 college freshmen reports that, "Academic credentials, rather than a love of learning, seem to be their motivation." Shame on us all.

What Parents Can Do

How do you raise kids to be high achievers without their suffering anxiety, dread and abject resignation?

Stop hurrying and stealing their childhood, structuring and scheduling their every waking moment. Read or reread David Elkind's cautionary book, "The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon" (Perseus Books)

Don't frighten them into believing in your master plan for academic and career success. Begin telling them as preschoolers that you love and admire them for who they are, not for the grades and achievements that they bring you. Encourage their own natural academic and extracurricular interests, regardless of whether they are deemed portfolio-advisable by costly college "handlers."

Urge them to volunteer and to serve others, and do so together as part of your family's values, not because it will look good on their college transcripts.

In short, love and support them as they challenge and search for themselves, fulfill their dreams and become the people they choose to be.

Carleton Kendrick is a family therapist and a contributing writer to <http://familyeducation.com>. For more advice about teen stress and raising high achievers, visit www.schoolcounselor.org.

Note to school counselors: Each issue of *ASCA School Counselor* magazine contains a column targeted to parents. Please feel free to copy this page and send it home with your students to provide their parents with your compliments.