

Teens are crumbling under extreme pressure. Parents need to change.

“Never Enough” delves into how and why today’s teens are suffering as they are pushed to achieve

Several years ago, Jennifer Breheny Wallace noticed research was emerging that showed children who attended “high achieving schools” were experiencing higher rates of behavioral and mental health challenges. It was so stark that youths in these schools were added to a list of “at-risk” groups, right along with kids living in poverty and foster care, recent immigrants and those with incarcerated parents.

Wallace wrote about this for The Washington Post. But the findings continued to vex her and coincided with the “Varsity Blues” scandal. Parents, she realized, were putting an inordinate amount of pressure on their children to achieve, to take all the AP classes, join all the activities, essentially do whatever it took to get ahead. The results of this are devastating. “How did we get to the point where parents were going to jail,” she wondered, because they were so desperate to get their children into high-end colleges.

At the same time, Wallace’s oldest of three was about to go to high school. “I came to the realization that I had four more years with him at home,” she said. “I wanted to know what I could do ... to buffer against it.”

Her new book, “Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic — and What We Can Do About It,” is the result of Wallace’s reporting on the topic. She talks to The Post about what she discovered and how she is trying to fight against the dangers of pushing our children to achieve. Answers have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Q: Along with the research you were seeing, the scandal, and your own family, what did you do to determine this warranted delving deeper?

A: I wanted to make sure this wasn’t just an East Coast-West Coast problem. I worked with a researcher at the Harvard School of Education and developed a survey because I wanted to know if it was everywhere, and what was the hidden landscape parents were feeling, and I was certainly feeling in my own home. Over 6,500 parents filled it out. I asked parents if they’d be willing to be interviewed, and hundreds reached out.

Q: So you were feeling the toxic achievement culture creeping into your own home?

A: Over the years, I had been noticing and so curious as to why my children’s childhood was so different than my own. Our lives felt so much busier. The weekends felt so much more fractured. Homework was much more intense. The pressure I felt for their success, it felt like it was my responsibility to help them be successful. While my parents encouraged my achievement, it wasn’t front and center in the house. So I interviewed historians, economists, sociologists. Parents are parenting today in a very different economic climate than I grew up in, being raised in the late ’70s and early ’80s. Life was generally more affordable then. Over the last decades, we have seen this ushering in of extreme inequality, a crush of the middle class. It’s been the job of the parent to help our kids thrive when we’re not around, and it’s so much more fraught now. Those pressures we’re feeling, we’re absorbing those fears.

We feel caught. We want to set our children up for success. But parents feel their communities are judging them. But they also just want to be parents and enjoy their kids and enjoy that connection. It's hard.

Q: Is it impossible for parents to step back and step away from adding to the pressure?

A: Not at all. I wanted to find “healthy achievers” and I wanted to know if they had anything in common. I found these healthy strivers had a lot in common — it all boils down to this idea psychologists call “mattering.” It's a psychological construct that's been around since the 1980s. Kids who felt a healthy level of self-esteem felt like they mattered to their parents, that they felt important and significant. Over the past few decades, researchers have found kids who felt valued for who they were at their core, by their family and friends and communities. These kids were relied on to add meaningful value back; those kids had a high level of mattering that acted like a protective shield. It worked like a buoy that lifted them up and helped them be resilient. Mattering has really changed my parenting and my life.

Q: How?

A: I used to solve for happiness. I now solve for mattering. If one of my children is acting “off,” I wonder if they're not feeling valued by me, by friends, by the school community. Or am I not relying or depending on them at home? My son, coming out of covid, wasn't feeling as connected to his friends as before covid. He was just a little lonelier. Then a few of his friends asked him to join the baseball team. They were short one player and if he didn't play, they wouldn't have a team. The cons were it's two hours after school every day. He said it would take away from his school work. But he said if he didn't do it, his friends wouldn't be able to play. So he did it. Before mattering, I would have maybe said school is the most important thing, baseball would interfere with grades. Instead, I realized we needed to bolster his mattering with friends. Not only did it make him feel valued by his friends, but it started an upward spiral. He had a deep sense of belonging and he really mattered.

Q: What other ways has the reporting on the book changed the way you parent?

A: His junior year (he's now a senior), I made our home a haven from pressure. It was the place to recover. We made a pact that we'd only talk about college stuff once a week on the weekend at a time when he wanted to do it. We'd block out an hour, but we'd usually be done in 15 minutes. So I could just enjoy him in the last two years of him being home. I also prioritized affection. Our teenagers don't necessarily want us hugging them all the time. But I'd find times when I'd massage his back or just pat his arm.

Q: How are parents doing today?

A: Parents are really anxious. Research tells you that a child's resilience rests fundamentally in their caregiver's resilience. That primary caregiver, well-being has to be intact. And adult well-being isn't what's being marketed to us. It won't give us the resilience we need to be first responders to our children. What will is our relationships. The communities I visited, they didn't have the time and bandwidth to develop friends to be true sources of support, people they could be vulnerable with. We're told as parents to put our oxygen masks on first. Really what these relationships are is having someone in your life who sees you struggling for breath, and puts that mask on for you.

Q: What can we do?

A: Make home a mattering haven. Let our children know their worth is not contingent on performance. Be careful about criticism, be careful about praise. Get a PhD in your child: What is it uniquely that makes your child tick? Their humor? How collaborative they are? Make that be what you talk about at home.

Parents need to prioritize relationships outside of the home for the benefit of people inside the home. You only need an hour a week of intentional connection with a friend or two for you to get that resilience you need. You need people to see you and love you unconditionally like you do with your own kids.

Q: What can communities do?

A: Communities can really try to focus on helping kids know they're needed, that the community depends on them. Ask them to pitch in, thank them. If you have a neighbor whose son is great with tech, ask them for help. Give kids in your community opportunities to be depended on and relied on.

Q: How can parents ratchet it down if they feel like they are the only ones in their cohort not pushing for high achievement?

A: There is a silent majority; don't feel like you're the only one. Find one or two friends who share your values — that's all you need. Then you can turn to them when you're feeling the contagion of stress all around you. Parents see this isn't working. They want solutions, and I found them in the families I visited around the country.

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