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The Hyper-Parenting Trap by Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D.

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Almost all parents are committed to being the best parents they can be. These days they are being told that keeping their children busy and involved from morning to night with enriching activities will result in accomplished, successful offspring. Yet, I suspect that such hyperactivity can lead to unhappy children who may be wrongly diagnosed as learning disabled, ADD, bi-polar, and depressed. It may also prompt angry, discouraged adolescents to look for relief in drugs, alcohol and sex. And, of course, such stresses can damage family life and strain marriages.

It is my mission to convince parents that they can do more by doing less, and that relationships are critical. Loving relationships and intimacy contribute far more to successful, rewarding lives than awards do.

The Hyper-Parent

Fifty years ago, the pediatrician Benjamin Spock did everything he could in his books to diminish parental anxiety. Dr. Spock knew that we all do far better when we are relaxed. Today, unfortunately, parental insecurity is kindled and tweaked. Stores have racks of parenting books and magazines that often make parents so anxious and vigilant that they overly scrutinize how soon their infants and young children crawl and babble.

Any delay or deviation, however minor, raises concern. So parents hire specialists to help them intervene early, just in case. One mother I know was warned that her five-year-old daughter had a “pencil-holding” deficiency, a portent of serious problems ahead. Tutoring was recommended. She sagely ignored that advice, and, miraculously, her daughter learned to live with her “disability,” eventually attending college. (She still holds her pencil the same way.)

Treating growing up as merely a rough outline that contemporary science and technology can dramatically improve flies in the face of human evolution. Child development is erroneously seen as a straight line: the child who reads early will be the Tiger Woods of the verbal SAT's. So parents are urged to accelerate development, despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary.

And while I know of no facts that support the value of early enrichment in the upper and middle classes, the concept has proved highly profitable for many entrepreneurs. For instance, we play “Baby Einstein” tapes to stimulate infantile brain development.

Parents can do more by doing less. We forget that while adult Albert was a genius, he talked late and did poorly at school. Were he a student today in an elite New York City independent school, I suspect he would receive a comprehensive evaluation and end up on Ritalin. Deprived of his daydreams, he probably would be able to focus more fully on the demands of fourth grade math. But would he have gone on to discover the Theory of Relativity?

Hyper-parenting is enticing, though, with its premise of fostering successful children. It blueprints every facet of creating “winner” kids through early activities, combined with intense practice, parental selflessness and ceaseless devotion to being best. It is no surprise that parenting is now America’s most competitive adult sport.

Going for the Gold

If parenting is a competitive sport, what is the Olympic gold? Getting children into top colleges. And, because it is “never too early to prepare for college,” hyper-parenting can start even before birth and prevail through the teens. Thus:

- Although American homes are stunningly enriched by any international standard, we spend exorbitant amounts for nurseries for newborns, who would be perfectly comfortable sleeping in a fleece-lined drawer.
- Convinced by research that “proves” that listening to Mozart in infancy enhances later mathematical ability, we play Mozart CD’s for our newborns. If well-conducted scientific research proved that the work of another musician – say, Mick Jagger – most promoted brain development, would that dictate what we regularly play at home?
- School-aged children are often not allowed to be average. They are either gifted or learning-disabled. And, apparently, sometimes a learning-

disabled label is preferable; I have heard of grandparents being told to seek an ADD diagnosis so that their grandchildren could take un-timed SAT exams, facilitating admission to an elite school.

- Research has found no correlation between the amount of homework early elementary school students do and their achievement levels (although a clear association does exist in high school). The amount of homework assigned to young children, however, has dramatically increased. Many parents hire homework consultants for their children, or parents help with the homework themselves. Schools are forced to scrutinize work to determine what was really done by the child.
- In the race to success, basic health and the notion of balance are ignored. Kids carry thirty-pound, textbook-filled backpacks that likely damage their spinal columns. Children display nervous tics and other physical manifestations of pressure and anxiety.

By the time many children reach tenth grade, they have mastered the blueprint. They think they know what it takes to “go Ivy”: never say what you really think to teachers (after all, they write your college recommendations); manufacture a resume that makes you sound like a seamless cross between Michael Jordan and Mother Teresa; do community service to help yourself, not the less fortunate; work endlessly, even at subjects you hate; and ignore what suits you specifically. In sum, it involves manicuring reality, crafting yourself into what others say you ought to look like, not what your inner voice tells you to become.

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How sad, when it is following one’s passions, combined with some common sense, that gives a person the best shot at a good life. In the classic words of Groucho Marx, “The real question is whether there is a life before death.”

Youth Sports: Hyper-Parenting at its Worst

Perhaps because elite colleges admit a disproportionate percentage of athletes, it is in the area of sports that today's parents are at their worst. So we see parents enrolling their four-year-olds in competitive soccer leagues, before they are old enough to understand the rules – let alone master the complex physical challenges of controlling a ball while running down a field.

Athletics can make important contributions to children's health, self-protective instincts and self-esteem. But the American Academy of Pediatrics has warned parents about the dangers of children competing in demanding, incredibly competitive sports. It advises that children play multiple sports and specialize in one, if they must, only after puberty.

Is anyone listening? Parents and schools hire demanding, and sometimes abusive, coaches to train "winners." In some sports, children risk illness and lifelong damage to joints and spinal columns. And, although we put our children into protective head and body gear, there has been a worrisome increase in recreation-linked injuries among five- to fourteen-year-olds.

Worst of all, the fun of simply playing can be sacrificed when sports become intense. Most children would rather play on a losing team than

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sit on the bench for a winning team. But, in their parents' quest for the gold, they receive the insidious psychological message: everything should be sacrificed for a medal. Alas, many play; few win. How is this pressure for kids? I asked a fourteen-year-old boy who was a very good athlete but only a so-so student what it was like to excel

at sports. He said that it was nice in some ways, but he would prefer just playing ball with his friends. "I'm judged in school work. I'm judged when I play ball," he said. "I just want some place where I'm not judged."

If it is true that good, strong relationships, not activities, determine successful lives, shouldn't this be encouraged, rather than worrying about Johnny hitting the longest ball in Little League? And, after all, what exactly do we consider "winning"?

Is it Worth it?

It is difficult to resist the siren call of the top schools. I myself struggle with it, although I know fully well that, while a school like Harvard is a great university for the right student, it is not the perfect fit for every high school senior.

There are several things parents should consider. The elite schools are not always the best places for undergraduates; students do not always receive the same attention from faculty and the administration as they would in a small, liberal arts college. And studies that evaluate the economic success of the graduates of various colleges have had surprising results. For instance, the college with the highest percent of corporate CEO's is not an Ivy League school. It appears that while the school that you attend might help you get a better first job, it is personal performance that counts after that.

Parents who really know who their child is and have a visceral faith that their child will find a good place in life maximize the odds of that happening.

Furthermore, real creativity, the engine of American economic success, is a quality colleges may not recognize. One young man desperately wanted to make films. He applied to UCLA's film program and was rejected. After a time at Long Beach State, he applied to transfer to University of Southern California's prestigious film program. He was rejected. But he was tenacious and succeeded in his goal. His name: Steven Spielberg. This has been dubbed the "Spielberg Effect," because the best indicator of success is the belief that you belong in elite institutions, whether or not you get in.

I do believe that such fortitude is crucial to success in life. And students who go to elite schools tend to be ambitious, tenacious and, sometimes, willing to play the system to get there. So if they retain these traits and don't burn out, as many do, they will likely do well. What about income? Some studies suggest that students who go to the very elite schools earn more in their lifetimes, but other research found that those who actually gain most from such schools are the children of the indigent who develop opportuni-

ties and connections there that the more affluent have simply by virtue of being their parents' children.

Ultimately, parents who, like me, struggle with this notion of the elite college as Olympic gold would do well to remember psychologist Carl Jung's statement, "The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases."

The Cost: Over-Scheduled Families

The drive to perfect our children by over-scheduling them in enrichment activities has dramatically altered the lives of American families. In the last twenty years, unstructured children's activities have declined by half while structured sports time has doubled. The life of the family has suffered: household conversations have become far less frequent; family dinners and family vacations have declined.

What about play just for itself? Many of us devalue it as purposeless. Today's children are so tightly scheduled that many have never invented a backyard game or had time to just hang out with friends. Few are rewarded for the joy they find in discovering, imagining, creating and exploring. When not in constant, frenzied motion, our kids have no idea of what to do with themselves.

And children lose the benefits of boredom. Boredom, dreaded by hyper-parents, is not necessarily bad. It can stimulate children to think, create and hear the soft murmuring of their inner voice, the one that makes them

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write this unusual story or draw that unique picture. America's success is based on people who tinkered and followed their inner passions. Kids need time to be alone, to rehearse in their minds, to relax and "veg out." This is something that video games do for many boys; it may be their one "Zen" experience in which they actually feel centered.

At the high school level, children suffer sleep deprivation as they busily rush from activity to activity, to endless homework, to tutors, to volunteering at charities – all to shape resumes to fit what elite colleges supposedly are looking for. And doesn't this over-scheduling impair their self esteem by subliminally suggesting, "If I am as good as my parents say, why do I need constant self-improvement?" It also says that we want our children to be

hyperactive, over-achieving, over-scheduled workaholics who win whatever the cost. Would you buy into that lifestyle?

Some children who can't excel at school smoke pot and drop out. As one adolescent said, "In my family, it is Harvard, Yale or nothing. And I just can't measure up." Others just resent their parents, the pressure, or the system – which they view as fraudulent. As one teenager told me, "I want my parents to judge who I am, not how I look."

As for parents, they deserve a life, too. But so often ice hockey practice is expected to take precedence over their Saturday night dinner with friends. This does not seem to be the healthiest of scenarios. Children I've known whose parents were pleased with their lives and marriages did far better.

Our Child-Centered Society

It seems that some parents look to children to give meaning to their existence. But living vicariously through them is too heavy a load for children to bear. What has brought us to this juncture?

When I was a boy, adults were generally the center of our universe. The idea that my parents might cancel a night at Grandma's for my game was about as likely as my spotting a whooping crane on the Hudson River. Rather, we kids hung around family and social events, listening to the adults talking or discussing events they considered important.

The social trends that have contributed to our child-centric world are complex. For instance, Doppler stethoscopes and ultrasounds allow parents-to-be to "bond" with their babies in utero. Unwittingly, this new technology has moved embryos to center stage. Rather than celebrating expectant mothers as special, contemporary books essentially treat them as selfless vessels for carrying pregnancy's central player, his majesty the fetus. Until sometime in the 20th century, childhood at least ended between ages seven and seventeen – not at twenty-six or thirty-four, as it often does today.

Traditionally, families were mutually cooperative, productive units in which each member contributed to economic survival. Today, most children are economically useless and have become their parents' greatest financial liability. Consequently, today's children end up either self-centered

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or feeling guilty. Good kids, who can no longer repay our sacrifices with hard work on the family farm, can only repay us with high grades, popularity, athletic accomplishment and the ultimate proof of success: elite college admissions.

Worthier Goals

As parents scramble to build their children's college resumes, they begin to assume the roles of cruise ship activities directors. Isn't being a parent a higher calling than that?

I have ambitions for my children and expect them to make something worthwhile of their lives. But I also want them to be mentally well, relatively free of unnecessary stress that might undo their equilibrium and able to assume the difficult responsibility of being the authors of their own lives.

In my clinical experience, parents who really know who their child is and have a visceral faith that the child will eventually find a good place in

If all we do is work, our children may conclude that we do not consider joy integral to a good life.

life maximize the odds of that happening. Parents who say, through actions and gestures, that they are very nervous about their children's futures – and therefore have to improve them incessantly – diminish the odds. They also may create a self-fulfilling prophecy. After all, children resent parents' lack of faith

in them and may, in response, live up to their fearful expectations.

I think we also are abrogating a fundamental responsibility: teaching children character. How do we do that? Whether or not we have thought through our philosophy of life, our daily actions broadcast it to our children. By applauding this idea and finding that one weird or reprehensible, by saying yes to this play date and no to that one, by valuing people of character and personal courage rather than kowtowing to wealth and station, we pass on our beliefs and culture. And it isn't just what we say, but how we say it. Didn't you know from the tone of your father's voice exactly what he really meant? Intelligent children watch what their parents do and come to their own conclusions, emulating or rejecting their parents' way of life based on whether or not it works from a child's perspective. If all we do is

work constantly and expect everyone else to do the same, our children may conclude that we do not consider joy integral to a good life.

As we parents race from activity to activity, are we promoting basic decency? Some of us run fast so we don't have to ponder what we are doing with our lives. But to help children become independent and successful, to encourage their thinking for themselves, we parents have to think for ourselves, to decide what life means for us. It is a hard task. Consciously or by default, we answer it every day in the choices we make and the actions we take. When we were in college, we were concerned with politics, music, art, history, war, peace, sports, business and world events. So why do our children primarily see us discussing schedules? If they emulate us, how will they learn to think about what is important?

To stimulate warm relationships with our children, we need to be with them with no goal in mind beyond the pleasure of spending time together, on walks, shooting hoops, playing Monopoly. The activity doesn't matter. We are what our children really need. The greatest gift we can give them is the deep, inner conviction that they don't have to perform well in order for us to love and cherish them.

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This paper is based on talks Dr. Rosenfeld gave in 2004 at The Rodeph Sholom School in New York City and in 2003 at the International Youth Sports Conference in Atlanta.