

College application season: The pressure's on
By Patricia Dalton of the Washington Post

Earlier this month, I received a panicked call from a mother asking whether I could see her son, a high school senior. She said he was irritable and was having trouble getting to sleep. He was refusing to talk about what was on his mind either at home or with his friends. It was the kind of call I have come to expect at this time of year. I am seeing more high school juniors and seniors than ever before who come into my office complaining of symptoms such as stomach pain or inability to focus. The common denominator? College application stress.

I often wonder how the kids I see now will fare during the next phase of their lives. Their reactions to good or bad news are often poorly modulated; many will be either elated or devastated by the fat or thin packages that are beginning to arrive in the mail. And their parents are right to be uneasy. Sure, some kids take it all in stride; some even thrive on the process. But my colleagues and I are finding that there are growing numbers of young people today who think of it in terms of their fate, that their college acceptance either assures them success or condemns them to failure. And they are too young to think in terms of such finality.

Underlying all this apprehension is the parents' conviction that getting into a prestigious college is the ticket to personal fulfillment and financial success -- two measures that are inextricably linked in the minds of many. Baby boomer parents, the most prosperous generation our country has ever seen, are communicating an unprecedented degree of anxiety to their kids about their futures, micromanaging each step forward. Add that to the competitive attitudes of kids' peers, and you can see why places like the Washington area have become pressure cookers for young people today. In offices like mine, therapists are trying to release pressure before the lid bursts right off.

High school counselors as well as independent consultants agree that competition to get into elite colleges has increased dramatically in recent years, and that many state colleges also have become more selective. Many parents could not get into their alma maters today. Sheer numbers are part of the issue: There is a population bulge in this age group; students are also applying to more colleges than they used to, partly because of the ease of the common application and partly to cover more bases. Participation in SAT prep classes is at an all-time high. Collegeconfidential.com, a Web site I was tipped off to by a high school senior, reports that the Ivies reject many applicants today with combined SAT scores of 1550. (Compare that with the stats reported during the last presidential election campaign: Bush's SAT score of 1206 was good enough to get him into Yale; Gore's 1355 took him to Harvard.)

Young people absorb this pressure from the air they breathe. They soak it up at home, at school, in books and magazines. It comes from parents, relatives, teachers and now even from their peers. And it can start at frighteningly young ages, like the 10-year-old girl who worried to me that she was not smart enough to get into a really good college. Then there was the 11-year-old whom I asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. She replied in a nanosecond: a law clerk, and then a partner, and then a judge and then a member of the Supreme Court.

Here's the recipe for success these kids have learned: Get high SATs and a high GPA so you can go to this college so you will get this kind of job (and perhaps find a partner with a comparable job) so you will make a lot of money and live happily ever after. The part that's never spoken -- and would be disavowed if put into words -- is that money will make you happy.

These children's parents (and I count myself among them) are the first generation to have grown to adulthood in largely carefree economic times. We have not lived through world wars or a national financial catastrophe. Many of us saw our families go from frugal to fairly prosperous. Lately, however, we've seen great reversals of fortune in industries from automotive to steel to high-tech, local businesses failing to compete with big conglomerates, and blue- as well as white-collar jobs being outsourced overseas. Economic changes have been hard to predict. As one of my friends has asked, "What career do you advise your child to go into today?"

It is certainly possible that today's young people could be the first U.S. generation in which many do not do as well economically as their parents. Adults, on whom children rely to interpret the world, behave as if this would be disastrous. When parents go into overdrive, they often justify their single-mindedness with the argument that an excellent education is what they had -- or, alternatively, did not have -- and therefore want for their children. There are even parents who transmit the message that college acceptance is so crucial that the end matters more than the means. When their children cheat on the SAT and get caught, both children and parents are outraged when there are real and serious consequences.

Sometimes what I hear is almost eerie: Young men and women who seem incapable of separating their own aspirations from those their parents hold for them. There are Americans who no longer make a distinction between needs and wants, even between expectations and entitlements. I have heard young men in my office express anxiety about their earning potential, especially in the eyes of their future mates. And I sometimes have to wonder whether their concern is not neurotic, but rooted in present-day American reality. Perhaps they are perceiving in their contemporaries an inability or unwillingness to adapt to whatever life holds for them. And their future marriages could well be in trouble if they experience the hard side of the wedding vows: poorer instead of richer; bad times not good; sickness rather than health. They have internalized a particularly insidious message -- that unless a person reaches the top of the remuneration hierarchy, life will hardly be worth living.

Parents, meanwhile, are making real sacrifices to try to guarantee the perfect future for their kids. A local college consultant once told me she sees some parents "impoverishing themselves" to pay for expensive colleges. I heard recently that a counselor at a big suburban high school has been making a point of asking parents whether they've put enough money aside for their own retirement -- a common oversight today. Parents like these claim that they just want what's best for their children; they want them to be happy and prosperous. But as one young person said to me during last year's college go-round, "Who are they kidding? My mother is miserable, and my dad works all the time."

Yet the parents still hope for positions of status, power and importance for their children. This is of course a particular issue in Washington, which attracts a population of bright, competitive people who are at least as ambitious for their children as they are for themselves. One young man put it this way: "If there is a ruling class, I intend to be part of it." My son's housemate at

Virginia Tech, on the other hand, who moved from Bethesda to the Denver area after eighth grade, told me he was glad to escape the stress he would have experienced here.

Another change comes in the form of increasing pressure from peers. One father whose child had been excited about her early-decision acceptance to an excellent, but not Ivy League, college in November told me that his daughter was having second thoughts, after hearing a friend go on and on about getting into a more "prestigious" school. I have heard high school students make disparaging comments about community college. One counselor described seniors collecting acceptances and then advertising them to their peers "as an ego trip." As he rightly observed, "One kid's safety school is another's first choice."

All this score-keeping takes a toll on camaraderie, which I remember as one of the chief joys of being young. Friendship and even the capacity for friendship suffer when young people are trained to be extremely competitive. The price is high when sympathy and goodwill are drowned out by jockeying to be better, faster, smarter, richer.

There is another price that relentless striving can exact, and this is perhaps the most pernicious one: a joylessness and weariness that shows up in children as young as middle school and can last the rest of their lives. In many of these situations, a disturbing undercurrent develops in the parent-child relationship. Even from very young ages, kids can smell a rat. They know if they are being called upon to realize their parents' ambitions and make them look good regardless of the price.

Whatever happened to young people charting their own courses? Marching to a different drummer? As fellow therapist Neil Schiff said when we were discussing this issue recently, "Whatever happened to ordinary? To just making a way through life?" These days, ordinary is equated with failure. Yet only a small percentile (in SAT terminology) will be the superstars that many parents have trained their kids to expect to be. The majority of us and our children are destined to be ordinary, normal, regular folk. In superstar-think, this means being a loser. Maybe we need to resurrect that long-lost virtue, humility.

At a time in their lives when teenagers need to learn who they are and who they aren't (and hopefully to preserve some vitality to bounce back come what may), large numbers suddenly feel that they may just not be good enough. Many parents had the luxury of almost no college pressure. Some of us went to what kids refer to as "no-name" schools -- I did -- and we're here to tell the tale. Even parents who went to selective schools experienced nothing close to the stress that their children shoulder today. We need to focus on our kids' overall well-being, not just their success in the eyes of the world.

Several months ago, an older woman gave me some words of wisdom that have echoed in my mind ever since. She raised a son and a daughter who are now both grown and gainfully employed. When they were in high school, she said that she had been fretting to her husband about their study habits and college prospects. He said to her, "Dear, just let them be. Let them land where they land." Now there's a concept.