



BY BARRIE MAGUIRE

*Pamela Toutant*

## Our Stress-Tested Kids

I was surprised but not shocked by last week's front-page story about allegations of cheating on standardized tests at an affluent Montgomery County school—allegations that have led to the resignation of the principal. And while the individuals involved, if proved guilty, should be held responsible for their behavior, before we parents in Montgomery County get into too big a huff, we would do well to consider the role we are playing in creating and maintaining our county's culture of achievement—an environment in which the leadership of a school in one of the county's most privileged areas may have placed test scores above integrity.

I think of my 9-year-old daughter and her friend Vanessa. When I met them at their bus the other day and asked, "So, girls, do you get to play before your art class today," Vanessa, the smartest student in the class, looked worried.

"We don't have time," she said.

"We have too much homework," my daughter added matter-of-factly. Swaying under the weight of their backpacks, they trudged ahead, leaving me and their childhood to bob in their wake while they gossiped wide-eyed about the friend who got a "C" on her report card—the fourth-grade scarlet letter.

Childhood, to my way of thinking, should have the whole sky to fly in. Along with a focus on external standards for achievement, there should be time to doodle and drift, to be silly, to learn how to be and keep a friend—all capacities we need to draw on as adults. Hard work and responsibility come soon enough. My concerns are not only philosophical: Our evening and weekend family life has come to feel like home schooling, with the research projects, science projects and various other academic endeavors droning like white noise in the background.

While I am clearly bothered by this, I'm also ambivalent about doing anything about it. Should my husband and I subvert this over-focus on achievement by suggesting to our children that they blow off their homework and play a rousing game of Monopoly with us? After all, isn't it our role to keep them on track so they can get what they want in life?

Should we take on their school, where we risk being branded by an overheated meritocracy as the type of people who want to "dumb down" education or who are willing to settle for mediocrity? Most potent of all: Our child, for the moment anyway, has climbed to the top of the mast. Why rock the boat?

Why? Because I am scared that at some point I will be having the kind of conversation my friend had a few midnights ago with her sobbing 16-year-old daughter—the daughter who gets straight A's at the most prestigious public high school in the area.

"There's too much pressure, mom. We all look like we are doing great, but underneath we are all a mess.

One of my friends is bulimic, another is suicidal and I feel like there is nothing I can do to help them!" her daughter cried.

"It isn't important to me that you get straight A's! We just want you to be happy," my friend pleaded.

I overheard myself the other day colluding with the very mentality I have come to disdain. My daughter was selecting her activities for summer camp. "Hey," I said, smiling a little too brightly, "why not take 'Fun With Math' at camp, give yourself a head start in fifth grade!"

Luckily, my daughter, in her exasperated preteen tone, broke the grip: "Yeah, right, mom."

It has always been hard to tell where the aspirations of parents leave off and those of their children begin. But these days, extremes of parents insisting that their children carry the weight of their ambitions are becoming increasingly mainstream: the soccer parents of 7-year-olds frothing on the sidelines; parents holding their 5-year-olds back from kindergarten so they will have an edge the following year.

There is a mantra where I live: that we must prepare our children for a more competitive world. But what is it we are afraid our children won't get, or will miss out on, be excluded from? Jobs? Survival? The Ivy League? The biggest SUV? Is there really more at stake in this plump economy than there was during the Depression and two world wars?

Perhaps the careerist culture of the baby boomers has come unmoored from any greater purpose than self-aggrandizement and, by extension, the aggrandizement of our children.

When I asked parents at a recent neighborhood party, all of whom were complaining about how their children's homework had taken over their lives, why there is so much anxiety about academic achievement, one mother pointed to deeper insecurities:

"If my kids can't keep up, they will fall behind. If they don't do well in second-grade math, they won't get into the highest math group in third grade. If they don't get into the honors classes in middle school, they won't be around the smartest kids. If they don't do really well on the SATs then they won't get into an Ivy League school."

"And so?" I pressed.

"And so," one father blurted out, "my kid would be average. Indistinguishable. Zero name recognition."

We used to get name recognition in our extended families, religious institutions and neighborhoods—places where we were something more than the sum of our achievements. Now it seems that we, our children included, often see ourselves as small fish struggling just to be seen in an ever widening pond.

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