

Academic Pressure: The Negative Impact on Adolescents Mental Health

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Introduction

Adolescence is a very critical time in a person's life as they are going through numerous changes whether that be puberty or transitioning into a new level of school. Going through all of these changes at once can have a toll on the mental health of adolescents. This is because adolescents become more sensitive during this time which makes them vulnerable to the different stressors that might be present in their lives (Gurung 2020). Out of all of the stressors that adolescents face, one of the most consuming ones revolves around their academics (Ang & Huan, 2006) (S. Jiang, Ren, C. Jiang & Wang 2021). Being exposed to these different stressors, especially academics, leaves adolescents feeling anxious and worried which may lead to depression. It has been stated that 20% of children and adolescents suffer from disabling mental illnesses, including depression (Nandagon & Raddi 2020). Mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety have become more prominent in the adolescent age range, as researchers have found that a high percentage of all lifetime mental health disorders were identified for the first time at ages as young as 14-15 years old (Zhu, Haegele, Liu, & Yu 2021). 14-15 years old is in the prime stage of adolescence and it is when most students start their high school career. Regarding academic pressure, there are many different sources where it comes from, but there are some that are more prominent than others. Parental pressure, peer pressure, and peer competition for high grades throughout high school and leading up to the college admissions process contribute to the development of anxiety and depression in adolescents.

Data Regarding Academic Pressure and Mental Health

The data in Table 1 (below), shows the characteristics of the four schools that were involved in a study that explained the relationship between academic pressure and anxiety/depression in

Table 1 Characteristics of the four study schools

Characteristic	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
School type	Key	Key	Ordinary	Ordinary
Family monthly income ^a	>\$854	\$731– \$1,220	<\$366	<\$366
N of adolescents	200	305	215	277
Gender % male/female	56/44	49/51	40/60	47/53
Mean age	16.6	16.6	17.1	16.8
Father % college graduate	74.5	27.1	7.3	23.7
Mother % college graduate	64.3	22.4	4.6	20.2
Parental academic pressure				
Mean	39.91	42.08	52.38	48.76
SD	10.98	13.25	13.18	11.67
Parental warmth				
Mean	117.70	119.04	108.72	113.04
SD	18.15	16.58	20.91	18.53
Adolescent anxiety				
Mean	36.48	39.21	39.43	38.45
SD	5.42	5.96	5.77	5.99
Adolescent depression				
Mean	38.91	42.88	41.99	43.02
SD	6.11	7.38	7.60	8.10

^a Family income originally reported in Renminbi (yuan) per month. Exchange rate at the time of data collection established as \$1.00 = 8.2 Renminbi

adolescents. The school that had the highest mean score regarding academic pressure also had the highest mean score regarding adolescent anxiety (Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier & Fang 2015). Therefore, this data shows that there is a relationship between academic pressure and adolescents' anxiety.

Parental Pressure

Parental pressure can come as a result of their desire for their kids to do well in school but sometimes this can lead to them getting too involved in their child's academic career which can cause the child anxiety and depression. The goal of any parent is to see their child be successful in life, and academics is one of the ways for their child to succeed. This creates an eagerness for parents to push their kids as, "ambitious parents long to see their children succeed academically" (Chen, Chou, Tzeng, Chang, Kuo, Pan, Y. Yeh, C. Yeh & Mao 2015). Because parents want the best for their children, they will sometimes push them regarding academics, whether that means giving them rewards for high grades or punishment for low grades. Henry, a current student, talks about the consequences of failing grades as he states that, "his parents

believe that if his grades fall, Henry should drop a significant extracurricular activity to focus on his academics. Getting good grades seems paramount to any other activity or commitment, even one that is personally important and meaningful” (Grant 2021) showing that parents put academics before anything else. Parents are also invested in their children’s grades due to the fact that the grades a student receives are reflected back on the family. This idea is expressed in more detail as it has been seen that, “Accolades that students received for performing well were transferred to their families, whereas lack of success was likely to generate criticism from the community and shame for the child and parents” (Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier & Fang 2015) showing how impactful a student’s grades can be when being looked upon by other members of the community. In regards to colleges/universities, these institutions tend to give out merit scholarships based on the level of grades a student has. So, because of this, parents will push their children to receive high grades so that they can earn high scholarships, which helps pay the overall tuition.

Because of the new technology in today’s society, it has become easier than ever for parents to track their child’s grades; one of the most popular apps where this can be done is called PowerSchool. PowerSchool gives parents access to constantly check if their child is meeting their expectations in regards to grades. Having this kind of access allows parents to be on top of their child’s academic career at all times, as “children and parents now anxiously monitor grades for individual assignments weekly and even daily” (Luthar, Kumar & Zillmer 2020). Constantly monitoring a child’s grade can cause a parent to become more critical of a lower grade than a child might receive. Checking their child’s grades is one of the main priorities for parents as “everyone in the community including parents are focused on grades and test scores' ' (Grant 2021). Even though parents constantly check their child’s grades throughout the

semester/marking period, the submission of final grades is a big event for parents as they eagerly wait to see what their children got after the end of a marking period. The students know this and one student shared his experience as he stated, “My parents have been very vigilant when the grades come in. It’s actually drilled in my mind” (Grant 2021).

All parents want the best for their children, so they will do anything they can to help them, and one of these ways is through purchasing extra opportunities. Parents that are in a higher socioeconomic situation have the unfair advantage of paying extra money for their children to get ahead academically. An example of this would be paying for their child to classes on the weekends or over the summer to improve their skills. These extra classes can cause their children to become mentally exhausted, but they still go through with them due to the fact that “because their parents make possible all these expensive after-school opportunities, children feel increasing pressure to use them” (Luthar, Kumar, and Zillmer 2020). These expensive after-school opportunities emphasize how badly parents want their children to succeed as they will do anything no matter what the cost is.

The college admissions process is one of the most stressful times in the student’s life, as well as the parents. It has always been said that getting into a prestigious university will give students a better future after college. This is an idea that is prominent throughout our society as “cultural, political, and economic factors create an environment that holds parents responsible for directing children toward high academic performance” (Shek 2005) (Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier & Fang 2015). In today’s world, it has become much more competitive for students to get into prestigious universities, and so because of that parents feel as though they must do whatever it takes. High grades are one of the main aspects that colleges look at when deciding whether or not they should accept a student into their university or college. This is especially true

in more recent years, as standardized test scores are not being considered as much as they have been in the past. Because of this, parents feel like they have to do whatever it takes to help their students get high grades so that they could get into these prestigious universities or colleges. Besides buying additional academic resources for their children, parents have also donated large amounts of money to a school in order to guarantee that their child will be admitted into the school. The most recent college admissions scandal regarding USC has really brought this to light and emphasizes how much parents will do in order for their children to do well in high school.

All of the examples talked about above show why parents care so much about high grades and what they will do to achieve those high grades. While these parents might think they are doing what is best for their kids, it may be hurting their adolescent's mental health. Adolescents want their parents to be proud of them so if they feel like they are disappointing their parents that can cause them major anxiety. Parents may feel like the pressure is encouraging their child but in reality "parental pressure may exacerbate test anxiety in children who may have a fear of disappointing their parents..." (Ritchwood, Carthron, & Decoster 2015). When parents have high academic expectations for their kids, it shows that they believe in them but it can also create a sense of worry in their children if they do not meet their parent's expectations. Researchers talk about this fear of not meeting parental expectations as they state that, "Adolescents place high value on their studies and put great effort into enhancing their academic performance, and if they are unable to meet their parental expectations, they may develop feelings of shame, hopelessness, and worthlessness, which are associated with depression" (Wang, Fan, Xue & Zhou, 2015) (Ma, Siu, & Tse 2019) which emphasizes how much adolescents care about their parent's opinion.

When parents get heavily involved in their children's academic life, this can make the child feel embarrassed or pressured to do well at all times. Research was done on German adolescents which showed that "Parental control/demandingness (telling the child what to do), and pressure (expressing upset when the child fails to meet expectations) were positively correlated with German adolescents' levels of anxiety..." (Wolfradt et al 2003) (Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier & Fang 2015). If adolescents are anticipating punishment from their parents because of a bad grade, it will cause them to feel major anxiety if they receive a bad grade. Parents' heavy involvement can make adolescents feel as though they have no control over their academic careers. Researchers talk about the reality of controlling parents as they state, "Chinese parents tend to have high expectations of their children's academic performance and be more controlling and restrictive, and all of these aspects of parenting may be associated with adolescents' stress and negative emotions" (Borellie, Margolin & Rasmussen, 2014; Kwok & Wong, 1999) (Ma, Siu, & Tse 2019) which shows the negative effect overbearing parents can have on their adolescent's mental health. When parents are heavily involved in their child's academics they form opinions and make critiques on their child's performance that are completely unnecessary. These critiques can hurt their child in the long run as, "perception of parental criticism is likely to induce adolescents' own self-criticism and worries about mistakes, which may, in turn, lead to depression" (Madjar et al, 2015) (Ma, Siu, & Tse 2019). The pressure parents put on their adolescents to do well in high school forms for various reasons including success for the child, later on, good representation of the family, and to get into a prestigious university. This pressure causes the parents to become controlling and invasive in their child's academic career which can lead to adolescents feeling embarrassed, scared, and overwhelmed which can lead to anxiety and depression.

Peer Pressure

During the stage of adolescence, the opinion of their friends is something that is most important to them, especially when it comes to school, so adolescents feel the pressure of trying to keep high grades so that their peers do not look down upon them which can cause them major anxiety, and later on depression. Students want to do well in school so they can feel like they have accomplished something, therefore making themselves and others proud. In today's society, receiving high grades in school has become the status quo, so if a student does not keep up they are most likely looked down upon. Having friends in high school and being considered cool is also something that is very important to adolescents. Excelling in academics is one way to boost a student's popularity as "academic achievement is linked with financial success and social status" (Hesketh and Ding 2005) (Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier & Fang 2015).

Students have an influence on one another as early as freshman year, as students tend to group up with peers that have similar interests and goals as them. Researchers talk about this in more detail as "high achieving adolescents were likely to have strong academic identities, seeking out friends from this valued domain" (Witkow & Fuligni 2010) showing how important it is to be strong academically as it helps you find a group to be a part of. Students try to group with peers that have similar interests as them because they know they will get along and it helps keep them motivated. For example, if an adolescent is doing poorly in school, people might not want to be friends with them because they feel like they might be a negative influence. It has been seen that "adolescents who are interested, engaged, and successful in school are likely to be able to find similarly motivated peers in the school; setting" (Witkow & Fuligni 2010). In most high schools, children are grouped together in classes by the certain level they are in

academically, for example, AP or honors. This is very important for the development of friend groups in high school, as most students become friends with people that they have classes with. Developing a friend group is something that is vital in the life of an adolescent and academics can help find them the people they belong with. This longing to be a part of a group will encourage students to do well in school but it also has the possibility of giving them added stress of trying to keep in line with their classmates.

Students feel like they need to be able to keep up with their classmate's grades or else they might be ridiculed or made fun of by their peers. One of the first things that happen after a test or assignment is graded is the big question being asked around the class: "what did you get?". If all the adolescent's other classmates go around and say that they got a high grade, the adolescent might feel embarrassed or ashamed to say his or her grade if it is lower than everyone else's. If everyone else got a high grade and the one student did not, their classmates might question his or her abilities, therefore singling out and embarrassing the one student with the lower grade. This question clearly shows that grades are a big deal to adolescents as "students are attentive to both their and their peers' scores; these grades were central to how students viewed themselves and others" (Grant 2021) emphasizing how much adolescents care about their grades as well as their classmate's grades. Also, because of the new technology, it is easier than ever for a student to constantly look at their grades. Most of the time when students look at their grades they want to look at them compared to their fellow peers and technology can help with that as, "new technologies bring the possibility of getting overly involved with checking the achievement status relative to others (Simmons 2018) (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer 2020). As well as wanting to match other students' grades, high school students feel the pressure to match the workload of their fellow peers to feel like they are on the same level. As having a high GPA has

become the status quo, taking a lot of advanced classes has also become the status quo in high school; almost every high school student at this point is at least one honors/advanced placement class, if not more. Trying to maintain a high GPA while also taking honors/advanced courses can be a lot of pressure for an adolescent especially if they already have a full schedule.

In high school, adolescents need a friend group to feel complete, so if they are struggling academically it may be hard for them to find friends, which can lead to loneliness, which can eventually lead to depression. If a student feels embarrassed or ashamed about their grades compared to their classmates, that could make them feel like they are not good enough, which could, in turn, lead to depression as well. The fear of getting looked down upon or made fun of because of a bad grade on a test or assignment could give the adolescent major anxiety as they feel like they are walking on eggshells at all times in school. Also, the pressure of trying to maintain an intense schedule as well as a high GPA to stick to the status quo could cause adolescents to feel very anxious and then later on depressed if they feel like a failure. Researchers talk about the effect this constant pressure can have on adolescents as they state, “students’ watchfulness - of not just their own GPAs but their standing relative to others competing for high honors - can engender a “survival of the fittest” mentality, which is associated with anxiety and stress” (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer 2020) showing that the continuous desire to keep up with classmates can have a negative effect on adolescent’s mental health. Therefore, the dire need to belong, the fear of embarrassment, and the urgency to keep up with classmates make adolescents feel symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Peer Competition

In more recent times the college admissions process has become extremely competitive as more and more students have high GPAs. Also, because of COVID-19, a lot of colleges and universities have decided not to use test scores such as the SAT or the ACT to determine whether or not a student will be admitted. Removing these test scores from the decision puts a lot more importance on having a high-grade point average (GPA). One of the reasons that the college admissions process has become so much more competitive is because of decreasing acceptance rates at top-tier universities. The acceptance rates for colleges and universities usually decrease every year but by a small amount, but in most recent years, the acceptance rates have dropped dramatically. For example, “for the top 50 ranked institutions, the average admissions rate was 35.9% in 2006 but had dropped to 22.6% by 2018” (Steele 2019) (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer 2020) which shows a dramatic decrease of 13.3%. Because of the increased technology, there are now websites where students can input all of their data and it would be able to predict the chance of getting into that specific college or university. A study that was done about high achieving high schools talks about one of these websites as it states, “online college preparatory programs like Naviance allow students to constantly track the odds of getting into a given college with a few changing points in overall grade point average (GPA)” (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer 2020) showing how modern technology can be used as a tool in the college admissions process. With decreasing acceptance rates, it is now more important than ever for students to maintain high grades in high school and have higher grades than the students competing against them for a spot at a university or college.

In order to gain a spot in one of the top universities and colleges, a student must compete against other students who are similar to them. This could mean that they are from the same area or even from the same school. Sometimes when admissions counselors are looking at applicants

from the same school, they may pick only one or two from the group and decline the other applicants from the group. The example I just stated is especially true when it comes to highly ranked public schools or private high schools since they are more competitive. Also, in a lot of high schools, additional focus is placed on the top 10 ranked students in the senior class. The rankings are usually determined by GPA and whoever has the top 10 highest GPAs in the class would be recognized. While there is competition to even get into the top 10, there is also usually a lot of competition within moving up the ranks in the top 10. The difference between the student that is number one in the class and the person that is number two in the class could be as small as .01. When a student takes an honor or advanced placement course and does well in the class, it boosts their GPA compared to if they got a good grade in a normal class. These small differences in GPA that separate the rankings drive students to push themselves to the absolute limits when it comes to the excessive amounts of honors and AP classes. These rankings force adolescents to compete against their friends and peers at all times during their high school careers.

Adolescents these days know-how competitive the college admissions process is as early as freshman year, and that alone can cause them anxiety. During the college admissions process, a lot of students have their mindset on a dream school that they want to attend and they will work so hard to earn a high enough GPA to try and get into that school. But because of the decreasing acceptance rates, sometimes someone with a really high GPA might not get into the school they dreamed of, which can make them feel worthless. They will try to take as many honors and AP classes as they possibly could just to earn a high-grade point average (GPA), even if that hurts their mental health. All of the sleepless nights and constant worries regarding academics can leave adolescents feeling mentally drained. Once adolescents feel mentally drained, they become vulnerable which can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Websites such as Naviance

allow students to track whether or not they can get into a school and since it is online they have access to it 24/7. Having 24/7 access to this kind of website can be harmful to adolescents as they have the opportunity to spend their entire day just looking at whether or not they will get in, which again can be mentally draining for adolescents. As stated before, a big part of an adolescent's life is their friends and maintaining those relationships with them, but competing against them for high grades may negatively impact that relationship. Researchers talk about the negative impact competition can have as they state, "peers may also exacerbate pressures, because constant competition naturally makes for some envy, with associated strains on relationships (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer 2020) emphasizing how jealousy regarding grades can hurt the relationship adolescents have with their friends. Therefore, because the college admissions process has become so much more competitive than it used to be, it forces adolescents to have to compete against their friends for the highest GPA which can lead to feelings of jealousy. These feelings of jealousy can lead to strained relationships with their peers, causing them to feel lonely which can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Conclusion

Throughout my four years of high school, I have definitely felt feelings of anxiety because of my grades. My parents always wanted me to do well, so even though they never put pressure on me, I put pressure on myself so that I would not disappoint them. Having a high GPA was definitely important to me in high school as all of my friends had pretty high grades. Because of my constant fear of not meeting the expectations I put on myself, I would get very upset if I received anything lower than a B+. Now that I'm in college and happy with where I'm at I realized that all of the constant worries were for nothing. I still care about my grades a lot

now at college, but I will not beat myself up over a B-. I have also seen this in others, my younger sister being one of the main examples of this. She was constantly worried, causing herself major anxiety if she received anything lower than an A. Although having high grades is important in the life of an adolescent, it should not consume their entire life to the point where it hurts their mental health. A person is defined by more than just their grades, so in the long run, it does not matter whether the final grade was an A+ or a B-. Once everyone in the adolescent's life understands that there will be fewer cases of adolescents suffering from severe mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Throughout this paper, I examined the different sources from which students feel a sense of academic pressure. From the research, it is clear that parents and peers play a big role regarding the academic pressure that adolescents feel. They serve different purposes but in the end, it pushes adolescents to a point that can negatively affect their mental health. This idea is emphasized as the students progress through high school as they are preparing for the college admissions process. In other words, the higher the grade level in high school, the more stressed students feel regarding their academics. Furthermore, the pressure from parents, the pressure from peers, and the need to compete for high grades in high school, especially leading up to the college admissions process causes adolescents to feel symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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