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A Nation of Wimps

Hara Estroff Marano

*The following is an excerpt from author Hara Estroff Marano's widely acclaimed book A Nation of Wimps, which describes the hothouse of modern childrearing in which parents undermine their children's success and short-circuit necessary brain development by incorrectly defining success and removing junctures of failure for their children. Read more about the book at www.nationofwimps.com.
-Editor*

The Age of Uncertainty

At bottom, hothouse parenting is the response of adults, fathers as well as mothers, to tremendous uncertainty and anxiety about what the next generation will need to thrive in the new economy. They know the rules have changed. Having been knocked for a loop themselves by new technologies and often the need to retrofit themselves to the economy, they assume their children are facing the same prospects. Their solution is to intensify parenting, to start at or near birth with classes and programs to equip their child with as many skills as they can cram in, in the hope that at least some of them will provide a ticket to success. Because landing on the right side of the yawning economic divide is so critical, they judge the stakes so great that each child is essentially in competition with all the others. The sense of competition encourages parents to do all in their power to create an advantage for their own child. Affluent parents hover and clear the path for their kids, making demands of teachers, administrators and coaches. The less affluent might vie to have their child singled out as special by being designated a genius, or an "indigo" child. Or they might seek neuropsychological testing to have their child declared "differently abled" and accorded academic accommodations that typically

come down to taking their tests without time constraints, most importantly the SATs.

It is almost touching that in times of such anxiety and uncertainty, middle-class and affluent parents still see education as America's salvation. But their approaches reflect the desire, whatever way they can, to seek individual advantage, rather than to strengthen a system of public education for all. The almost exclusive focus on achievements that can be measured—such as reading skills—comes at the expense of more subtle abilities that can't be measured—social skills or knowing how to play—but have a broad influence on development, on eventual success and certainly on quality of life. "The emphasis on performance is not developmentally meaningful and fails to furnish a philosophy of life," says Edward Spencer, associate vice president for student affairs at Virginia Tech. "College is treated as a credentialing factory rather than a place for developing the whole mind and the whole person."

Hothouse parents do exactly what everyone does when anxious. They tighten their grip. Anxiety narrows and shortens their range of focus, as it does for everyone. They exert pressure on their kids and hang on tight, overcontrolling them. It is the nature of anxiety to exaggerate dangers and apply hypervigilance.

Parental anxiety, however, is badly matched to the needs of children. In just the most obvious of instances, the children, unlike their parents, are digital natives, virtually born masters of the new technology that adults are still struggling with. Parental anxiety is also nonproductive. If there's one thing people need in a fast-changing world it's the freedom to experiment and even fail, so that they can figure out what it takes to succeed, match that knowledge to their own interests and find a way to make their

own creative adaptations to the conditions of contemporary life.

Moreover, the ordinary obstacles and challenges that are swept from children's paths keep them from developing the skills they need to cope with life's uncertainties and vicissitudes. It might be fodder for stand-up routines were the consequences not so sad.

Intrusive parenting undermines children in the most fundamental ways. It spawns anxious attachment to the children. In doing so it sets them up for lifelong fragility.

Despite all the parental pushing and overinvolvement, despite the \$600-an-hour top-of-the-line tutors, despite the accommodations and untimed SATs, despite constant surveillance down to the last curly fry, the kids who have virtually sacrificed their childhoods for a shot at the Ivy League are poorly prepared for changing a major or handling romantic rejection, or for the real world when they get there. "I see the interactions between parents and students," says a high school history teacher in New York's affluent Westchester County. "I wonder how much anxiety this parent is creating for the student by laying out, when they're in the sixth or seventh grade, that they need to get into Harvard. And then that parent seeks to relieve anxiety not by addressing the issue at hand, not by dealing with the anxiety and giving the child tools to cope with it, but by seeking out an accommodation. The child never learns to get past the anxiety."

Child Abuse by Any Other Name

There's abundant evidence that parental obsessiveness has reached the point of abuse. It's most obvious in children pushed to achieve their best in athletics; their pain typically declares itself in a frank, physical way that can prevent them from functioning at all and can even derail future development. Across

the country, orthopedic surgeons and sports doctors report skyrocketing rates of overuse injuries in kids as young as eight—the kind that until a few years ago were seen only in adult athletes after years of playing professionally. More kids today are being urged to specialize in one sport at an early age and train year-round so they can engage in high-stakes competitions. Forget neighborhood pick-up games; there's nothing casual or recreational about sports anymore; if you play, you play to win. That's how kids and their parents define success at sports.

And for such kids, summers are increasingly for suffering. It's an epidemic, say sports physicians. Dr. Sally Harris is one of them. Based in Palo Alto, California, she found that the number of overuse injuries virtually doubled from the summer and school year of 2005-2006 to the summer of 2006. In 2003, the latest year for which national data are available, more than 3.5 million such injuries in children under age 15 were treated in the U.S., out of approximately 35 million children from 6 to 21 who participate in team sports. Parents not only push their kids to practice and encourage them to join traveling teams, especially if they are teens, but send the kids to highly specialized sports camps where the training can be superintensive. Many kids from affluent families fill their summer vacation by going to a succession of such high-powered programs and even squeeze in a few during holidays and breaks in the school-year schedule. "It's not enough that they play on a school team, two travel teams and go to four camps for their sport in the summer," said one family sports medicine expert. "They have private instructors for that one sport that they see twice a week. Then their parents get them out to practice in the backyard at night."

Dr. James Andrews, a prominent sports orthopedist in Birmingham, Alabama, makes no secret of his astonishment. "You get a kid

on the operating table and you say to yourself, 'It's impossible for a 13-year-old to have this kind of wear and tear.' "Like others, he regards it as "a new childhood disease." Concerned observers believe that coaches and parents are pushing bodies that are not ready for such stress. Muscles, bones, tendons and ligaments get painfully inflamed or break down faster than their young bodies can repair when pushed beyond their physical limits by the repetitive motions that incessant practice demands. Cortisone shots can relieve the pain but not heal the damage. When an orthopedic surgeon explained the nature of her child's injury to one mother, she broke down crying—not because her son was suffering but because the baseball-playing boy wouldn't be able to pitch for a whole year. "Sports are everything to us—that's the pronoun she used," the surgeon relayed.

Those who treat the pediatric injuries point the finger at an overaggressive culture of organized youth sports in league with overinvolved parents. The adults tend to push their kids back into competitive play before they've fully healed. For the kids, the gain is often more than pain. Around the country, in affluent communities, parents are now paying their children if they achieve in sports. "It's amazing how many parents are doing this," a suburban Michigan mother told me. "In my community, the going rate is \$50 every time the child competes and gets first place or the team wins. It's easy to get caught up in this. My daughter is a swimmer and she came right out and asked me why she doesn't get paid." She thinks "it's causing kids to rot from within, while parents are living their glory days through their kids."

Commerce is complicit in the pushing of children to the point of abuse. The highly competitive athletic shoe companies openly reward superspecialization in youngsters with cases of free merchandise and invitations to select sports camps that they run. They are hoping to discover and groom the next face of the sport. Adidas has its Junior Phenom Camp for basketball players in middle school. If they are good enough, they might graduate to the Phenom 150 Camp when they enter high school. National scouting services the shoe companies hire leave no child unscrutinized and unevaluated; they comb the country looking for the promising talent. Invitations can come with guarantees of media exposure and attention from college recruiters. As Reebok's senior director of grassroots basketball says, "we're going to find them, expose them and get them used to the grind at an earlier age. I believe in that theory." Not content to let Adidas and Reebok run away with all the middle schoolers, Nike recently made its own bid to put competitive pressure on ever-younger children by launching a new national tournament for sixth, seventh and eighth graders. One scout said that he never hears parents complain when their kids show up on the lists of prospective talent. Instead, he hears from parents who think their kids should be ranked higher.

Before childrearing became a hothouse, sports-minded kids might have played baseball, basketball and football all in one day. According to Dr. Lyle Micheli, head of sports medicine at Boston Children's Hospital, that was actually good for their bodies. Because the different sports make different demands on differing body parts, the bodies of those who played them developed in balance. Now, he says,

“young athletes play sports supervised by adults who have them doing the same techniques, the same drills, over and over and over. There is no rest and recovery for the overused parts of their body. Parents think they are maximizing their child’s chances by concentrating on one sport. The results are often not what they expected.”

A Philadelphia orthopedist tells the story of a mother who recently asked him if there wasn’t “some kind of shot or fix-it procedure I could do for her 11-year-old daughter’s ankle so she could be ready for an upcoming regional competition. I told her that if it were the Olympic Games coming up, perhaps we could treat this situation differently. But as far as I understood, her upcoming competition wasn’t the Olympics. At this point, the daughter is giggling—but the parent is in the corner crying. I said: “This isn’t Curt Schilling in the World Series. It’s not worth not being able to run anymore for a plastic gold-plated medal.”