

Teens Tyrannized by College Admissions Pressure

Doing College is a member (registered user) of San Ramon Express

Dear Stressed about Daughter's Stress:

Yes I do have some thoughts. The problem you describe is not confined to your daughter's high school campus. According to a recent study carried out by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, called *The American Freshman: National Norms*, found that students in this year's class of U.S. college freshmen reported the lowest levels of emotional well-being on record. Just over half of this year's college freshmen (51.9%) reported feeling 'above average' in terms of their emotional health. This figure is down 3.4% since last year and 11.5% since 1985, when the question was first asked. Also, this year young women were far less likely than young men to report high levels of emotional well-being. It is likely that this study's findings reflect, at least in part, the growing amount of social and academic pressures that our high school students experience. By the time our high school seniors graduate, they may have lost the pleasure of learning by an over emphasis on achievement which is equated with success.

The situation you describe regarding your daughter is increasingly common. It is peer pressure, and it can be considered a form of social bullying when accompanied by negative and hurtful comments. Teens experience different levels of competitive college admissions pressure and teens react differently. Some can shrug it off, but many find the whole business of comparing grades and test scores and discussing what colleges they plan to apply to uncomfortable and anxiety-producing.

I advise students to do their best to not engage in these types of conversations. An individual has a right to keep some things private. Although your daughter may be friends with the students who are involved in this academic arms race, she can make a firm decision to steer clear. You might gently suggest that the best friendships offer rewarding, positive experiences rather than demoralizing or degrading ones. If your daughter is willing, perhaps she could break up her day socially by seeking out the company of students who are not obsessed with academic competition. If she feels this is not a realistic option, then she can try to change the subject and/or explain to her friends that she does not want to compare grades, test scores and college plans. She can be honest and mention that it just raises the level of anxiety and that is counterproductive. There may even be a couple of other students in her group that will welcome this idea and will be glad your daughter spoke up.

It is difficult for students to be assertive and not go along with the crowd; but that type of assertiveness should be encouraged. A growing sense of mastery will be the reward along with freedom from anxiety. Your daughter can spend her time far more productively researching a balanced list of colleges that are a good fit for her as well as immersing herself in the extracurricular activities she enjoys. This will have the added benefit of improving the overall

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