

E SUPERMOM... AND DAD

Risa: Older Teens

When I told my seventeen year-old daughter that I had not yet settled on a topic for this month's column, she suggested that I write about teens and stress. Unfortunately, the topic is quite apropos for her and most every teen I come across.

A national discussion of the stress our children are under has been sparked by the film, "Race to Nowhere," by San Francisco mother Vicki Abeles. I was fortunate enough to see it alongside superintendents and school board members from several Long Island school districts. They listened to the movie's message and were genuinely interested in addressing this issue. Although the film speaks to multiple issues within our educational system, it especially highlights the increasing hyperfocus on grades and entry into selective colleges, to the great detriment of our children's mental, emotional and physical health. Find out more about the film at www.racetonowhere.com.

My district's middle school nurse has told me that she often sees students who are complaining about stomach pains. Their discomfort seems to be psychosomatic, as it is not associated with any traditional illness. But, it is very real. These kids are sick from stress. My district is not unique.

Within three months of my now twenty year-old son turning fourteen, I was invited to a curriculum meeting at the high school, where the faculty reviewed the requirements for High School graduation to a room of nervous eighth grade parents. I sat there dumbfounded, as I tried to grasp the difference between the Local Diploma, Regents Diploma, Regents Diploma with Designation and Regents Diploma with Designation and Honors. After hearing about the honors and AP courses and viewing the templates in each subject area explaining the usual sequencing of courses from 9th through 12th grades in all the major subjects, my head was spinning. I tried not to bring my anxiety home to my middle schooler. Despite the traumatic curriculum meeting, our school district has tried to address some of the most stressful issues. A schedule was put in place to limit testing in major subjects to specific days, which unfortunately led to an increased number of multiple page "quizzes" to circumvent the testing day restrictions. Still, the district successfully adjusted the bus schedules and all the school schedules to accommodate a later start time for the high school. The latter change was most appreciated, since I know that my seventeen year old never seems to get more than a few hours of sleep. She was even voted "Class Sleeper," after actually falling asleep during a chemistry exam (and still getting a decent grade).

A majority of teens here are convinced that they need to take the hardest classes, obtain leadership positions in multiple extra-curricular activities and perform the type of community service that would either cure cancer or raise enough money to fund a cure, to be admitted to a competitive college, without which they might have no shot at happiness in life. Couple these pressures with the enormous amount of schoolwork, the numerous supplemental essays and portfolio requirements for many college applications, and the result is that some of these teens are "burning out" by the time they are seniors in high school. Some develop eating disorders and some drink alcohol. My daughter started drinking iced coffee and eating pixie sticks to stay awake.

Teens who might otherwise prefer to retain some sense of normalcy in their lives, are surrounded on all sides by over-achievers with helicopter parents. I truly believe that most parents want the best for their children and hope that they reach their potential. Unfortunately, I believe our children are often feeling that even their best efforts might be inadequate to get them to where they think they need to be. These teens, my daughter included, begin to view every test, every paper, and every quiz, as the one grade that will facilitate admission to their dream school or crush their dreams forever. Some teens fixate on one particular school, which seems like it might meet all their needs, and begin to believe that entry into that particular college alone will afford them happiness. This situation puts an enormous amount of stress on these young people to be perfect.

I have tried to explain to my daughter that even though a student's grades, class rank and school accomplishments appear to define her in high school, that high school is a small closed society of which she only is a member for a few years. After high school, the world is a very different place. Although students continue to be defined by their grades in their college years, to gain admission to graduate schools or for purposes of entry level jobs in their field, people become identified more by their specialty, area of interest and career goals. In theory, after completion of the college admissions process, no one will ever again care about a student's high school G.P.A. or SAT score. Still, while they are in high school, these indicies seem to trump everything else in life.

The solution is unclear at this time. "Race To Nowhere" has opened a conversa-



tion, and perhaps more high schools, and even the colleges, will take notice. We are doing a good job if our children aspire to do great things and work hard. The challenge is to foster that, while trying to maintain a healthy balance. It would be a shame if our children's only memories of high school are of studying, tests and resume-building.

By Risa C. Doherty

John: The Dad's Point of View

We are now playing the waiting game for colleges. The applications are in. The tons of mass mailings and brochures from colleges not selected have been recycled. We've heard from one with rolling admissions already, which is nice. We should hear from the others in March. The only thing that is for certain is that our son Jay will be spending a fair amount of time out of the house and into the college world once late August or September rolls around. Therefore as parents it's kind of our duty to make sure he is ready for that.

The first thing we are getting him rolling on is driving. He's never been anxious to drive. We've never been anxious to have him drive. Driving just complicates things, but unfortunately after awhile it does become a bit of a necessary "evil" so to speak. Unfortunately I am not the best driving instructor. I tend to hold on for dear life and phantom break when I think he should be breaking. Apparently I also mumble things like, "Please God, no no no!" "Yikes, I can't believe this is happening." "I'm getting too old for this..." Okay I'm paraphrasing but you get the idea. My wife is calmer than I am while driving but as department chairperson now she is kind of busy and awful tired these days. Really the last thing she needs is to come home and go driving with a 17 year old. She has enough stress as it is. Therefore we have decided there are somethings better to let strangers teach your children. We are signing him up for driving lessons.

We're also teaching Jay how to cook. Nothing fancy mind you but we're covering the basics. He's actually been cooking for a while now. He's mastered the grilled cheese, tacos and the microwave. Still we are trying to get him to expand his culinary horizons and getting him to branch out into main courses for more than one person. I am also teaching him how to man the grill as well, a man has to know how to man the grill. Oh, I also let him order the pizza over the phone now. No man can be complete in college unless they know how to order pizza.

I'm also teaching Jay self-defense. He is a smart kid and a big kid and thanks to all the tennis and racket sports he's played he has become fairly athletic so he is pretty good at avoiding trouble. Still there are times when trouble kind of finds you. I just want him to know how to knock trouble down so he can get away. Just the basic, quick strike pressure points and arm locks and leg throws. Things I didn't want to show him when he was younger but figure he should know now just in case. Sometimes ala Kato from the old Peter Sellers Pink Panther movies I will even "surprise attack" him to make sure he's ready. It's actually a lot of mindless guy fun. I've said it once, I'll say it again, my wife is a very patient woman.

We are also working on laundry. For the first 16 years apparently Jay thought laundry was done by brave laundry elves who would take his dirty clothing that had been dropped every where in his room and turn it into nice clean folded laundry. He now knows the true identity of those elves and they are not happy campers. He also knows that you must carry the laundry yourself, separate the colors from the whites and wash the colors in cold and whites in hot. It's not rocket science, heck it's not even bottled rocket science. He's got it down pretty well. The grumbings are even getting less and less.

Finally we're encouraging him to do things without being asked. For instance when there is a lot of snow on the driveway, shovel it. When you see the garbage is filled take it out don't stuff it down. Or when the dog dish is empty, feed the dog. That type of basic stuff. We are encouraging this by using positive reinforcement and praise. It seems to be helping.

The good thing is most of this teaching has been done over the course of the last 17 years. He already has a lot of skills needed to get by on his own. I'm pretty certain the ordeal will be harder on me. Next time I'll talk about easing the transition.

By John Zakour

