

The Oy Oy Oy Show:
How Anxiety Harms Student Academic Performance

BY WENDY MOGEL

Every morning on Air America radio, you can hear *The Oy Oy Oy Show*. Host Katherine Lanpher reads a short news item to co-host Al Franken. He responds in the voice of an old Jewish man.

Lanpher: “Halliburton Subsidiary Lands \$5 Billion Iraq Contract.”

Franken: “Oy!”

“Rising temperatures force Swiss ski resort to use fleece blankets on slopes to keep them from melting.”

“Oy! Oy!”

“Jolie, Pitt, taking home Ethiopian orphan.”

“Oy, oy, oy!”

They discuss the news items for a moment and that’s it. *The Oy Oy Oy Show*. It lasts only two minutes, but effectively provides a daily dose of oy.

I’m a member of the Los Angeles Association of Independent School Counselors. Often our meetings have an Oy Oy Show flavor.

So much stress these children are under. The girls are starving themselves! Oy! And cutting themselves! Oy oy! They take so many AP’s. They never sleep. Oy oy oy! And the parents — so demanding! Nothing is ever good enough: not the teachers, not the GPA, not the lunch menu! Oy!

When I hear this kind of talk — and am able to resist joining in — my inner cheerleader wants to counter with the good. To say, “You counselors just love psychopathology. Face it, you’d be out of business without problems. The students are fine.”

In many ways, independent schools are psychologically healthier and more enlightened environments for children than they have ever been. Many students flourish. In large, under-funded public schools, students complain that no one sees them, no one knows them, no one will notice if

they are gone. In independent schools we write inspired, detailed descriptions of the students in report card narratives. We have nooks and crannies for kids, places for the conventional stars as well as the potters, fencers, and athletes. We no longer just teach sports, we teach fitness for life: yoga, Pilates, the habits of wellness. Our sex- and drug-education programs are increasingly sophisticated and developmental. Many of our teachers take the Schools Attuned training and attend to learning differences. Every mission statement says it: We are interested in the “whole child.” We foster individuality, creativity, leadership.

There are some amazing things happening in independent schools. I recently had a conversation about “mirroring,” the psychological concept of having a child’s unique strengths reflected back by adults in a way that promotes growth, with Patty Lancaster, the school counselor at the Archer School for Girls in Los Angeles. At Archer, a student decided that she wanted to start a peer mediation program. The school provided faculty support and funds for a peer mediation club that was so popular and successful it turned into a peer mediation skills class, which in turn became a two-year program that is now a permanent part of the curriculum. Current tenth graders mediate almost all the middle school conflicts. (Lancaster said, tongue in cheek, “Thank God I don’t have to do that anymore!”) The older students also host brown-bag lunches with parents, where the students educate the parents about the transience of middle school social agony and reassure them that they need not step in to fix everything for their daughters.

This scenario, the seed of a student idea and student energy sprouting into a garden, is not a bit unusual. So why are the counselors shaking their heads and muttering? In truth, it’s not because they love psychopathology. It’s because, amid all the positive developments, some serious problems have arisen, and the counselors feel help-

less to address them.

The Anxious Generation

To investigate the counselors’ concerns, I questioned some colleagues about mental health problems in independent schools. My sources included two long-term school heads, two neuropsychologists who have been testing kids in independent schools for 20 years, an upper-school nurse, a college dean of students, and a college president. I asked, “What changes do you see in students over the past ten years? Are certain kinds of problems more prevalent?” I was startled by the consistency of their answers: Every single person mentioned an increase in student anxiety and symptoms of stress. Oy.

One of the neuropsychologists told me, “I’ve been seeing a clear pattern of high verbal skill with lower performance skills... [specifically on] tests where the child works against the clock and tests where children have to integrate novel information. These kids are strong verbally but they have a sluggish cognitive tempo. Many also have difficulty with ‘output’ and with the demands of social situations. They have trouble picking up social cues, so the outside world is taxing to them. They want to stay at home where it is safe and secure.”

Performance tests are affected by anxiety. Anxiety inhibits the learning process. It interferes with memory, attention, retrieval systems, processing, and motor speed. In addition to low scores on these tests, the neuropsychologist was struck by what the children had to say about the testing experience, especially the younger ones who have not yet learned to inhibit their own negative running commentary.

“I saw two kids for psychological testing today,” she said. “Both of them had a difficult time persevering and obviously lacked confidence. They said, ‘I’ll never get this. I’ll never finish. This is too hard. I give up!’”

In the past children rarely spoke this way about such testing, even

though we used most of the same tests. Children used to enjoy the attention and the experience. It felt like a game. They wanted to come back. They asked their mom, “Does she baby-sit?”

The other psychologist I interviewed for this article concurred: “I see much more free floating anxiety. It’s because we assign kids the wrong tasks at the wrong times. For example, the middle school years are the period of development when the neurons of the frontal lobes become better myelinated (covered with fatty insulation to speed neural transmission). This is the ideal time to train kids to work independently, to develop ‘executive functions’ such as organization, time management, and test preparation skills. When we load up the middle school curriculum with taxing content — the introductory version of 11th-grade AP American History, for example — we overtax the students and deprive them of the opportunity to master the important developmental task of academic self-reliance.” The consequence of all this? Outside educational therapists are hired to teach organizational skills to students buckling under the burden of a developmentally inappropriate workload and parents tend to get involved in nagging, test preparation, and coaching their own children.

The idea of starting kids early with academics sounds good, but it’s rife with problems. We often end up with anxious overachievers who feel little pride in their work or bright but demoralized underachievers. Vivian Gussin Paly, author of many books on early childhood education, has warned us for years about the ramifications of age-inappropriate schooling for young children, arguing that play, and lots of it, is essential to healthy development in the early years. Well, she’s right. And her concerns are now manifesting themselves in older students, too.

Recalling the “early advantage” studies of two-year-olds who were taught to read and do math, the psy-

chologist echoed Paley's concerns. "In kindergarten these children did read earlier and were better in math than their peers but the longitudinal data show that by age eight any advantage of accelerated exposure had washed out and only one difference remained," she said. "The kids exposed to the early interventions were more anxious about their performance than those left to rot on the vine. When we ask students to grow up before they are ready we just makes them anxious and delay their growing up!"

A college dean of students reported, "The incoming students have been so scheduled, so sleep deprived and pressured, that they come to college too finely tuned. They're like thoroughbreds. If they 'throw a shoe,' they can't recover. Our mental health services can barely keep up with the demand."

My interviews also yielded survey data from a diverse group of schools. Again there was surprising consistency. Most upper schoolers sleep no more than six-and-a-half hours a night. Some have no lunch break during the entire school day. Many have less than a half an hour to themselves on a typical weekday. Seventeen out of 60 eleventh graders in one school are in therapy, either outside of school or with the school counselor. Ninety-four visits to the school health office for stress-related issues were logged during a 14-day period. Of all visits to the health office, 30 percent were categorized as stress-related.

Besides the intellectual cost — the cognitive slowing, self-doubt, and loss of pleasure in challenge — what are other symptoms of stress? The counselors see a rise in digestive and eating disorders, headaches, generalized anxiety disorder, substance abuse, social and school phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorders (these are the students who can't let go of details, are perfectionistic, and overwork for school assignments). Perhaps most alarming, there has been an increase

in self-injury — a desperate and poignant cry for relief. These symptoms are not those of students who aren't seen, aren't known. They are the result of too close a watch, symptoms of privilege, sky-high expectations, and an ever-narrower definition of success.

Are We Headed for the China Syndrome?

One possible outcome of all the pressure on our children may be glimpsed in a new phenomenon that is affecting children in China (see related article on page XX). If you enter the word *jiaolu* on Google China, you'll get nearly a million hits. *Jiaolu* means *anxiety*. Mark Magnier, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, reports that a recent survey by the newspaper *China Youth Daily* found that 66 percent of Chinese young people consider themselves under heavy pressure to perform in school and succeed in the marketplace at a very high level. He writes: "Youngsters have little time for anything but class and homework and as *jiaolu* builds, teen suicide rates rise. 'Dear Parents, I can hardly express my gratitude for bringing me up,' read a note left by Tian Tian, a 12-year-old girl in the northern Province of Shanxi. 'But I feel under such pressure. There is too much homework for me. I have no choice but to die.'"

The cause of all this suffering? Magnier explains that the movement from Communism to a market economy is providing stunning opportunities for Chinese youth. They sense that they're living in unique era where fortunes can be made if they are willing to move quickly, take risks, and compete with their peers. In addition, parental expectations and ambitions are channeled to the young. "This is because parents, sometimes referred to as the 'tragic generation,' had their most promising decade stolen when the cultural revolution threw society into chaos, shuttering schools and destroying careers," Magnier writes.

I'm struck by the parallel between the situations of Chinese and Ameri-

can youth. Both societies use a narrow definition of success: in China, you (and your parents) are what you earn; in the striving classes in America, you are where you go to college. In both countries a sense of national and global instability leads to an apocalyptic urgency about making it. The young people feel that it's now or never. Or maybe it was yesterday and I missed it.

A Remedy: Stop, Look, and Think

We face a paradox. Our accelerated curriculum, heavy homework load, and crowded line-up of extracurriculars are actually sabotaging our children. Our goal of ever higher academic performance is actually depressing students' cognitive functioning, academic vitality, and sense of well-being and self-reliance.

These are the serious problems facing independent schools. What can we do? We can take a moment to appreciate the solid core of good as well as our progress in understanding children and their intellectual, emotional, and physical needs. Yiddish eloquently expresses our failings and fears — *Oy!* — but Hebrew points toward the ways in which humans can emulate the divine. *Tikkun olam* means to heal or repair the world, one person at a time. Of healing, Hippocrates never actually said, "First do no harm." But he did say, "Declare the past, diagnose the present, foretell the future; practice these acts. As to diseases, make a habit of two things — to help, or at least to do no harm." In order to heal our children we must first recognize their ailments, study the roots and causes, and plan for a different future.

To begin, we can look at school-day scheduling. Are our programs developmentally appropriate? How many core classes will we permit students to take in a semester? How many AP's? Do the students have sufficient breaks during the day to take a breath? To snack and dine? To socialize and plan? To catch up on missed work?

We can consider how our children

spend their after-school hours. Are we realistic about how much time it takes to do homework *and* sports *and* other extracurriculars *and* SAT prep and tutors? And for transportation to and from these activities? Do our children have any truly free time at all to interact with life on their own terms? Are they getting enough to for sleep?

Finally, we can confront the touchy issue of politics. Do we put the concerns of faculty, coaches, and department chairs over the needs of the students? Do educators and administrators resist relaxing the workload because they fear parental complaint or value their own or the school's reputation over the children's well-being? Are our sibling acceptance policies appropriate for the rigor of the curriculum? Do we use college placement as a marketing and recruitment tool? How do these decisions affect the students?

Until recently, parents and educators have not been able to foretell the future, as Hippocrates advised. We didn't know where the high expectations, extreme academic pressure, and panic mentality would land our children. Now we do. And while it may not be possible to create a perfect campus where all the students glow with self-confidence and fully realized potential, it's a worthy goal, and we're not too far off. The way to help our children may be found by heeding another proverb: "Physician, heal thyself." The students have done their part — they've studied and improved themselves to the breaking point. Now it's up to us adults who guide them to change our expectations. We should save our oys, our exclamations of distress, for, say, the acts of self-serving politicians or corporate spokespersons who, straight-faced, proclaim that the scientific evidence of global warming is not yet evident. When it comes to responding to our children's education, wouldn't we all be much better off if we could exclaim, *Ahhh?*

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Wendy Mogel is a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles, and author of the best-selling parenting book The Blessing of the Skinned Knee. A special thanks