

Parent's Perspective

Examination Stress and the Psychological Well-being of Children

In Conversation with Parent, R. Vidya

According to a survey conducted by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), over 80% of the students in Classes 9-12 suffer from anxiety due to exams and results. This recurrent phenomenon of young students experiencing high stress levels during examination periods for long periods of time often materializes in the form of drastic changes in diet and sleep patterns, social isolation, inability to focus, hyperventilation, panic disorders and even develops into physically debilitating ailments including pain disorder, nausea and body ache.

The need to constantly excel in academic performance fuelled by societal norms and familial expectations means that children internalize a constant need to be competitive, even at the cost of their own physical, psychological and social well-being. Constant comparison by authority figures also means that children associate their self-worth with external validation and competitive reward. These behaviors are currently encouraged even from extremely young ages, with children spending their formative years under coaching institutions and academic centers. A 2015 research study revealed that 66% of the students feel pressured from their parents for better academic performance, as reported by the Times of India. The fear of failure and its accompanying social consequences often means that children and even young adults take to harmful coping mechanisms, often succumbing to the toxic cycle.

However in recent years, more parents are becoming aware of toxic cycles of competition and achievement as well as how stress affects children. Understanding how stress impacts children requires parents to comprehend the



negative impacts of excessive expectations during these vulnerable years as well as instills a need to assimilate academic schedules and requirements within routines in such a manner that the child grows up to positively regard the process of learning and teaching. More often than not, children begin to detest educational environments due to constant associations of the process with metrics of success and achievement; further highlighted within homes. This can create a toxic cycle of stress and pressure, wherein children feel compelled to meet unrealistic expectations in order to gain approval and validation from their parents. Undoing this cycle includes integrating healthier attitudes towards academic goals, positivist conversations between parent and child where the child is allowed to express their fears and concerns as well as schedules that allow the child to rest, enjoy and explore their passions. By promoting a well-rounded lifestyle that encompasses various interests and pursuits,

parents can help alleviate the pressure associated with academic performance and cultivate a positive attitude towards learning.

As more parents become familiar with the origin of academic stress and its detrimental effects, *Anthropos India Foundation* conducted an interview with a parent to gauge how they deal with academic stress as a mother of a 16 year old who would be attempting his board examinations next year, with both parent and child wishing to remain anonymous. *Mrs V (47)* believes that while examinations and academic knowledge are an integral part of a student's life, they should never hold power to detrimentally affect children and parents psychologically. *Mrs V* ensures that while regular academic schedules are integrated within her son's routines, he also gets a significant portion of time to himself. This includes free time to follow through with his hobbies, regular conversations on the effects of stress, gradual and holistic ways of bettering at subjects that

the child finds difficulty with as well as family bonding time. All of these measures ensure that the child does not associate the process of learning with fear, but rather with growth and development.

Similarly, a conversation with the child *H (16)* revealed that he does not view academics as something extremely stressful. With his parents giving him freedom over what subjects he wishes to pursue according to his passion, *H* views learning and education as something that he enjoys. He does admit that while at times he feels pressured due to curriculum and external expectations, he has found healthy ways of coping with his stress and patterns that allow him to holistically get better where he wants to. It is important to cultivate such positive patterns and remind children that their self-worth extends much beyond external markers of success and that their guardians can provide safe spaces for them.

