

More Than Teenage Angst: Exploring the Relationships between Depression, Anxiety and Academic Pressures in Today's Youth

By Niki Janzer

Parents around the nation can agree that children are often unpredictable. Their moods can change at the drop of a hat, and it can be difficult to understand what is going on in their heads. Recent studies show, however, that children's moods are changing for the worse. *The U.S. News and World Report* states that major depression in youth has increased from 8.7% in 2005 to 13.2% in 2017; this is a 52% increase in depression rates over 12 years (Lohmann). The Child Mind Institute reports that diagnosis of anxiety disorders went up from 3.5% in 2008 to 4.1% in 2018; this is about a 17% increase in the diagnosis of anxiety over the course of 10 years ("Understanding Anxiety"). There are many factors that may contribute to this negative impact on children's lives, but the one that stands out the most is school. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center reported that in teens, "academic pressure tops their list of stressors: 61 percent say they face a lot of pressure to get good grades. By comparison, 29 percent say they feel pressure to look good; 28 percent to fit in socially; and just 6 percent to drink alcohol" (Flannery). These statistics suggest changes in children's academic atmosphere are connected to these rising rates of anxiety and depression. Specifically, children report anxiety and depression resulting from pressure to compete academically. This increased pressure to compete and succeed is a trend more widely reflected in American society.

Culturally, the United States puts a bigger emphasis on meritocratic practices and rationale. The idea of meritocracy is that those who succeed do so using their superior abilities and work ethic, while those who fail lack those merits. A fitting example of how this is seen in the educational field is Angela Duckworth's idea of grit. Angela Duckworth is a psychologist

from the University of Pennsylvania; she came up with the idea of grit while working with 7th graders in New York City public schools. Duckworth defines grit as “passion and perseverance for very long-term goals” and cites this quality as the main factor for future success. This idea of grit was/is widely accepted; Duckworth’s book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, became a New York Times bestseller and she was even awarded the MacArthur Fellowship (“About Angela”). As a culture, the United States loves promoting these meritocratic ideals; we pride ourselves on the notion of the American dream — the idea that in America the key to climbing the socioeconomic ladder is hard work and perseverance — so it is not hard to see why so many people subscribe to the idea that grit is the foundation for success.

Since Duckworth’s rise to fame, the idea of nurturing grit in children has been implemented in the classroom (Denby). However, it is important to stop and think whether the promotion of this idea with children is going to help or harm them. The theory looks past many other possible factors for success and failure. David Denby points out in “The Limits of ‘Grit’” that grit fails to account for a child’s socioeconomic status (SES), home life, disabilities, and many other factors that can contribute to a child’s level of accomplishment; if these factors are not in the child’s favor, they may not demonstrate the same “grit” as their peers. For example, children with a rough home life, some who come from low SES backgrounds, will develop high levels of stress in infancy; these stress levels will result in high levels of cortisol which can damage the development of the prefrontal cortex (Denby). This results in “...hampering the set of skills known as executive functions, which comprise working memory, self-regulation, and cognitive flexibility” (Denby). These abilities are crucial in the functioning of grit (Denby). In this light, it seems as if the idea of grit simply ignores factors such as the wealth gap.

A study conducted by psychologists Lara Farrell, Anouk Sijbenga, and Paul Barrett showed that there are major differences in rates of anxiety and depression depending on where children fall on the socio-economic ladder. Their study shows that children who come from lower SES schools/ environments are more depressed and have lower self-esteem than those from higher SES schools. However, those from higher SES schools/ backgrounds are generally more anxious than those from lower SES backgrounds. As said perfectly by Jennifer Wallace of the *Washington Post*, “Anxiety can come from worrying about keeping up with or outshining peers, while depression can be caused by a failure to achieve.” Children from low SES backgrounds do not have the same tools to keep up academically. No matter how hard they try, they are at a disadvantage compared to those from higher SES backgrounds. This may result in a sense of failure and helplessness which can lead to depression. In contrast, children from higher SES backgrounds have the tools needed for success. In this respect, it seems as if there is no other excuse for average or below average accomplishment in school. The result is a constant need to compete with their peers. Therefore, it makes sense that this competitive nature would lead to high rates of anxiety among high SES children. Regardless of how increased pressure to succeed affects different individuals, it has negative psychological effects for all children.

The grit narrative pushes the blame from struggling school systems and economic inequality onto the children themselves. This is not the only harmful aspect of grit. In accordance with the aforementioned American ideology, the idea of grit does not reward children for other positive qualities such as kindness, creativity, or happiness (Denby). Duckworth worked with over a hundred and eighty schools to implement the idea of grit. She came up with a list of character traits that the schools would aim to nurture in their students: “self-control (both academic and social), zest, optimism, social intelligence, gratitude, and curiosity” (Denby). This

list seems to include only qualities that make for more diligent, and socially palatable workers. The list does not mention any moral qualities such as honesty or compassion for others (Denby). The lack of these qualities makes it clear that the aim of grit is not to make children happier or mentally healthier in their school environment, but to make them conform to specific behaviors which are likely to lead to financial success in the future. The wide acceptance of the idea of grit shows that in the culture of the United States, these meritocratic ideals are a key component in our value system. Many parents and educators are more focused on creating successful and hard-working children rather than kind and happy children. In this light, it is understandable to see why rates of anxiety and depression have been steadily increasing.

After taking the pandemic into account, it is clear that these issues are only getting worse. Children are expected to keep up in school while dealing with stressful home lives and the personal backlash from a global pandemic. They are not only expected to juggle this adversity but also expected to do it with limited social interaction. For younger kids especially, this lack of time with peers can set them back socially; it can affect their mood and mental health as a whole. Bethany Ao of the *The Philadelphia Inquirer* states that “emergency department visits related to mental health were up 24% for children aged 5 to 11 and 31% for children aged 12 to 17 from April through October.” With increasing academic pressure and the anxiety promoting pandemic, it seems as if stressors for children are coming in from all sides. In addition, the pandemic is only worsening the wealth gap. As reported in *The Guardian*, “In the 12 weeks between 18 March and 11 June, the combined wealth of all US billionaires increased by more than \$637bn to a total of \$3.581tn....Over the same period, 44 million Americans lost their jobs and filed for unemployment insurance” (Rushe). This means that more children will be exposed to the economic stressors their parents are facing, and they will be less likely to have the tools they

need for online school such as wifi, a quiet space to work, or a laptop to attend classes. Using this information, it is reasonable to assume that this loss of resources will result in an increase in feelings of depression and low self-esteem in children.

With all these factors working against our nation's children, is there anything parents can do to help? Although they cannot change our nation's attitude towards success, there is potential for change on a personal level. It is important for parents to acknowledge how academic pressures on children are increasing. To combat the pressure, parents should strive to nurture a sense of self-worth in their children that is not tied solely to academic achievements. A study conducted by Jennifer Crocker of The University of Michigan shows a link between negative outcomes and self-esteem tied to academic performance. The study states that "College students who based their self-worth on academic performance did not receive higher grades despite being highly motivated and studying more hours each week... Students who based their self-worth on academic outcomes also were more likely to report conflicts with professors and greater stress" (Dittman). By nurturing self-esteem in other areas, parents may be able to help their children avoid these outcomes. There is great value in encouraging extracurricular activities in sports, the arts, or in other creative endeavors that the child enjoys; this will help to create the feeling of success outside of academics and may also create a sense of belonging. In addition, encouraging a child's altruism by involving them in service projects may lead to a great sense of satisfaction by helping others. Most importantly, it is crucial that parents approach their children with the understanding that academic pressure, anxiety, and depression are increasing and that academic success is not the only measure of worth in a human being. Although this may not solve all our children's problems or change our societal views in general, we may be able to dampen the

effects of this harmful mentality one child at a time, thus slowly improving and incrementally helping to ease the psychological burden on our children.

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