ICS PARENTS AND TEACHERS:

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE & STRESS IN STUDENTS

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**THIS PRESENTATION**

* share perspectives about teens’ worries about performance and getting into university
* consider what’s too much, and what’s not enough
* look at perspectives of your children at home, and my perspectives from office conversation
* talk about how parents help their students with health and happiness, and achievement, -- and yet well-intentioned efforts can contribute to distancing, sadness, and even self-defeating actions
* talk about matching students with colleges/universities (rather than  “getting into the best school”)

            I consult in schools, help with educational coaching, developmental counseling, therapy, and offer marital counseling. For twenty years, I have been a faculty member at the UW and UBC medical schools. My focus is on achieving change and growth.

**TEENAGERS’ PRIVATE THINKING ABOUT FAMILY, SCHOOL, WORK & SOCIETY**

            Teenagers’ experiences of and within learning, school performance, shifting allegiances, anticipations, and plans undergo changes every 4 to 10 months. As behavior and appearance seem unchanged, these parameters change, - usually with only felt change in mood, or with outside changes in social attractions (available/withdrawn at home, selection/interaction with friends, physical presentation, retreat to electronics) or social complexities (decreased initiative, bullying, provocative actions).

**TEENAGERS’ PRIVATE & HONEST THINKING ABOUT COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY**

I describe views about performance and about university, which students privately hold.  Teens progress through a developmental sequence, which determines how they think about themselves, their performance and their future. These views, and how in-sync or out-of-sync with parents the student feels, may be unspeakable, and/or unthinkable. I will describe these “private stages.”

**UNIQUE MECHANISMS OF PARENTS’ INFLUENCE**

            Parents need to know how they can directly affect their child’s performance, and how they can become relevant.  Many students tell me that their important adults sit in two, contradictory camps:  work, performance and excellence VS full life, relationships and happiness. We focus on strategic parenting, and mechanisms of parent effectiveness.

**MY EFFORTS WITH 7th GRADE through COLLEGE-AGE STUDENTS**

* *My objective is to help teens gain strength and confidence.* Mastery – especially at school - the single basis of the teenager’s definition of self, and her/his self -esteem.
* *I describe causes, dynamics, and severity of teenager’s difficulties, and determine ways to improve functioning and protect the student.* I meet with parents first, to understand their perspectives and what they want me to learn about and change.  I then meet with the teen to study the causes of the difficulties, and determine techniques for resolution.

* *I diagnose what’s wrong and how to fix it.* I then determine if remediation, counseling, therapy, or medical technology. I determine a variety of strategic approaches, which will produce different types of change.
* *Students usually partner with me, and feel understood.* This action then extends into a consensually crafted effort, which focuses on change and results. At a “round table meeting” with parents, I focus on two or three technical approaches, from quickest and situational, to more comprehensively focused on learning, character, and future, developmental matters.
* The chosen technical approach involves teachers and parents, moves the teenager to taking on increasing responsibility, and keeps the intended product clear. While family is the primary platform for personal experimentation, and growth, -- solo study, classroom, friendships, working, travel, and university are respected as most important, new life arenas. My context is primarily a developmental one with technical clinical considerations, always mindful of the anatomy of change.

**MY BACKGROUND: ITS INFLUENCE ON MY INTERESTS IN STRUGGLES WITH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND WITH ACADEMIC PLANNING**

            I imagine that my interest in, worry about and efforts with middle school and high school students must have –at least partially - evolved out of my own sadness, confusion, and intimidation as a teenage and young adult. As a high school student, - I tried to keep going, while I privately struggled with hopes, assumptions and expectations of others. My private struggles, like those of many I.C.S. students whom I have known, limited my curiosity to learn how I was unique and finding my way. No one knew what was going on inside me. There was nothing dramatic, - but discerning my own ways of effective learning and functioning were not of interest to my family or teachers. This caused me have to double my life time of confusion and struggle, before finding my way through learning and educational systems, and toward an exciting life.

I grew up in New York City, with my mom and dad, and my grandmother, - all of whom were blocked from getting educated.  (My sister arrived after me, and also struggled with education and construction of her future.)

I went to public schools in New York.  By the time I got to 8th grade, I was really struggling. My previous ease with school (through 7th grade) had disappeared. Learning felt irrelevant and boring. I couldn’t concentrate or study effectively. I needed to take breaks and think, but the structure didn’t allow this. I needed to talk with teachers and classmates about what I thought I heard or read, - but talking in the classroom would get me in trouble. They knew I was smart, and they didn’t know I had new; unique learning/classroom needs (like all kids). My needs felt like deficiencies.

My parents did not have an ease with reading my books, learning from my teachers,  or sharing excitement about and sharing in my curiosities. Meeting me half-way, and  bringing  an adult openness about themselves would have been a great help. Yet this kind of conversation was difficult and out of reach.  And, they had no way of knowing how powerful their personal openness, sharing and partnership could have been.

My parents’ innocent assumption was sacrifice everything for the goal of performance and educational advancement. This was at the expense of experimenting with different ways of growing and learning. This was at the expense of my older self, really getting to know my parents as adults with inner worlds. All of this his deprived me from re-setting and moving ahead, because I could not learn and appreciate how my parents struggled with and negotiated (inside and outside) their personal lives and their learning challenges.

Without the ability to experiment with myself, to explore, and to really know my parents, I felt my sadness and loneliness (while I presented myself as happy and optimistic). And, - I almost gave up.

  It was actually fear and guilt, which propelled me forward.  I actually cut myself off from myself (if that makes any sense!), and I just memorized. I studied, read, and played sports all the time, only taking time to rest my nervous, worried body.

In my senior year at my new high school (we moved), I met a teacher who welcomed me. I think I was recognized, because I was the only new, senior student.

This teacher was different. He didn’t pressure, or threaten, or worry me. I began to write a kind of diary. One day he asked me about my college plans. I replied “I don’t know….my parents don’t know….in the city, nobody cares.” I reminded him that my grades were not great in my sophomore and beginning of my junior years. (My parents reminded me all the time.)

Mr. Becker asked me, “Where would it be happy to live?”  I never forgot that question. I don’t remember my answer, and I remember that I thought about Boston.  A few days later a baseball coach told me that I shouldn’t go to Boston, because it would be bad for my future.

I chose Boston, and began a “remedial summer”, after high school graduation, there. My academic life continued to be very intense and pressured, I remained cut off from myself, and I got good grades.  I felt very alone. I didn’t make friends. One fellow student told me that I should live in Cambridge…not somewhere else. I called my parents, and told them about my pain. They praised me for my hard work and good grades.

I dropped out in September, and went on to a small school in Ohio.  I missed the city, and I continued to feel sad and I continued to pressure myself to work hard. I studied biology and chemistry, and added psychology at the end of my undergraduate years. I worked in a lab for a year, after college.

From 21 to 27 years of age, I studied education, then psychology and then micro-biology. I was a chemistry teacher in a high school for a year. Next I studied education…again! Then I worked as a rehabilitation counselor in a V.A. Hospital, and then I got a job as a psychologist’s assistant at the Massachusetts General Hospital.

I used all of these 8 years to struggle with academic commitment and planning, and to eventually discover how I thought and learned, and what was interesting and happy.  I established what I needed to learn happily and to grow.  Blocked from these pursuits and connections from 13 to 21, - I did 8 years of exploring, from 22 to 30 --experimenting, and then growing, ..8 years late!

From 28 to 36, I enjoyed learning in a field, which I had previously never even heard of. Most profoundly, I felt happy and curious. While in my doctoral studies, I only occasionally worried about grades. My education continued to internship at the Children’s Hospital National Medical Center, two extended fellowships in Europe, and another one (after living and working on a gravel and grain ship in the Aegean) back in Washington, DC. ).

  I remember that, when I was 29, a vivid memory preoccupied me:  I recalled that there were several classmates in my two high schools, who had ease and happiness with their learning, performance and planning. I remembered that they spent time with individual parents.   I recalled the sensation that they weren’t goody goodies, and yet they had relationships with their individual parents which I didn’t understand. While training in England, I came to a rather powerful realization:  that my high school classmates changed a lot, from their earlier years that I once was close to them and we fell out of touch, and that they must have done something purposeful, which delivered them to their very effective, happy positions.

I ask you to consider my delayed, turbulent and lengthy process of experimentation and discovery, -- as it may provide glimpses of needed accomplishments, how they should occur sequentially, and the important role that strategic parenting plays. We can imagine that – in my earlier years – how important interpersonal accomplishments with parents would have set the stage for self reflection, better mood, and successful learning and performance.   (Typically, in high school, students experiences of learning and school change. Learning and assimilation get harder, and performance is translated into definition of self, and is said to be predictive of life-long success. Cumulatively, many forces prevent happiness.)

  Let’s sum up profound changes which are somewhat generic and responsive changes which can open doors for creative, personal growth:

* new mental structures and bodily regulatory structures are required, and must begin to be discovered and developed by 9th grade;
* self starting and autonomy become required abilities;
* the teenager is normally directed by, and seeks out qualitatively different connections with peers and teachers, and with parents.

New, dyadic relationships with parents, are actually required, for many children, and not optional for developmental progression to move normally. These relationships are used to understand “adult ways” of thinking, and of negotiating difficult challenges, self-discovery, and close relationships.  Teaching the teenager is no longer effective, and may actually diminish academic functioning and further distance and diminish the adult-teen attachment. The major dynamic of teaching and learning is identification with the parent’s internal, as well as external/behavioral self.

These new relationships are characterized by increased, mature closeness, and “separateness of self”. Success with these new relationship constructions progress to greater separateness, and the teenager temporarily leaving the parent!

There is a real, sequential progression, which describes how many high school students must explore experiment, divorce themselves from out-of-sync adults, and eventually, achieve effective confidence and happiness.  All of this must occur before they can perform in dependable, mastering ways, and subsequently plan reliably.

Later middle school and high school is the best time to do this, and it can’t easily be done in an atmosphere of intensity, in which parents bring pressure to perform excellently, and demands to “get into the best school”……and, yet…..getting into the best school is very important!

Again, using myself as an example:  my school and career changes, through my 20s, with chaotic, non-linear! Stops and starts and curves, occurred because I was deprived, in my teens, of natural, intimate connections with differentiated parents. I was deprived, in high school of encouragement and partnership, to experiment and discover my learning needs.

In my twenties and early thirties, without purposeful intent, - I sought out and got to know very personal aspects of four teachers (who were, in fact, parent figures for my still unsure self). My learning and growth, within the four relationships, provided a stage, on which I could explore and discover my learning needs, and on which I could follow an evidence-based judgment about my future. My public achievement accomplishments were realized upon a foundation of happy, curious, and confident.

**PARENTS OF TEENAGERS….RE-CONSIDERED**

            With consideration of developmental findings in cognition and self psychology, Iask parents to re-consider their views of teenagers’ challenges and needs, as she/he moves through school and toward university. We know that personality development, and aspects of cognition are discontinuous (relative to the first dozen years). It is likely that personal matters such as motivation, mood, regulation of self, organization and planning, and evidence-based assessment of self can be prepared for and enhanced by a re-invented parent-child relationship.

Developmental studies show that teenagers’ views of rigorous school academics and to post-high school life differ from those of their parents. Further, - they require parents to change, and a changed dyadic relationship with their parent, if they are to reconsider their views of academic mandates.

            Profound restructuring of a parent’s approach to the teenage is frequently the starting place. Efforts are often slow and ongoing. A construction of a new foundation for an adult relationship with your daughter or son may become one of your greatest accomplishments!

See you soon!