



# Parental Pressures - A Major Stress Factor for Children in India: An Approach Paper

Article ID:009

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**Abstract:** For Indian Parents, one of the biggest sources of pride is when their children achieve academic success. Obtaining high grades in school/college, to be at the head of the class, undertaking additional study to expand knowledge and fulfilling the expectations of their parents are all pursuits that Indian children are expected to achieve.

**Keywords:** Suicides, Children, Parental pressures, Stress, Wholesome Human Being

## I. INTRODUCTION:

All situations, positive and negative, that require adjustment can be stressful for any person. According to Canadian Psychologist, Hans Selye<sup>[1]</sup>, the notion of stress can be broken down into Eustress (Positive stress) and Distress (Negative Stress). Both the types of stress tax a person's resources and coping skills; although distress has the potential to more harm.

Every 90 minutes a teenager tries to commit suicide in India.

In 2006-07, 5857 students took their own life, which works out to a stunning 16 suicides a day. While global teen suicide rate is 14.5 per 100,000, a 2004 study by the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore reported 148 for girls and 58 for boys in India. In 2012 in the age group up to 14 years, 1353 girls and 1385 boys committed suicide.<sup>[2&3]</sup> The alarming growth in the number of suicides among teenagers can be seen from the table below:

Year	No. of Reported Suicides
1998-99	800
2004-05	2555
2006-07	5857

Source: AIIMS, NIMHANS, NCRB<sup>[4]</sup>

In the 8 years India has seen more than 600% increases in the number of suicides among teenagers. This is only the tip of the iceberg as for every reported © IJPMN, Volume 1, Issue 1, December -2014

case of suicide; there are many that go unreported. Moreover, teenagers suffering from depression are not even part of the statistics. If we include all these, the problem of mental health of our teenagers that we are sitting on is of Himalayan proportions.

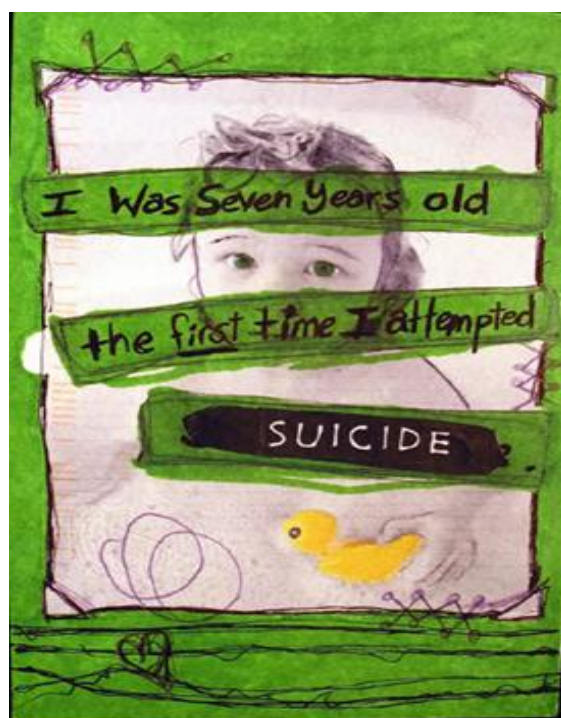


Illustration #1

## Reports on suicide among children across India

Report #1: A 1st Year Medical college student Naveen, who killed himself at his college campus in Vandalur, near Chennai; was reported depressed as he was unable to cope with the demanding syllabus. He was not interested in Medicine at all, but his parents insisted that he study medicine.<sup>[5]</sup>



Report #2: In Salem & Namakkal districts of Tamil Nadu, four students from different private schools committed suicide in June 2012 within a week of school re-opening as they did not want to stay in the school hostel. The children, all in the age group of 14 - 17 years had repeatedly pleaded with their parents not to put them in hostel and resorted to the extreme step of taking their life when the parents did not accede to their requests.<sup>[6]</sup>

Report #3: In Bangalore at least 5% of the 14,989 girls who went missing from 2009 to 2011, ran away from home as they were unable to cope with the Parental pressure on high academic performance.<sup>[7]</sup>

Report #4: In Karnataka it was brought to light that most of the girls who went missing had run away from home due to poor performance in exams and fearing violent parental retribution. The young girls feel distressed and trapped between the parental pressure and the resultant inferiority complex arising out of their poor performance in academics.

Report #5: The high suicide rate among students in India, especially among children up to 14 years of age, is a serious case for concern in India. One of the major contributing cause is the pressure to do well in school. What is surprising is that the pressure is not coming from the Teachers, but from the Parents.<sup>[8]</sup>

Report #6: The then Union Human Resource Minister, Mr. Kapil Sibal observed that, "the sudden spike in suicides among students is a result of growing parental pressures on the child to beat his peers."<sup>[9]</sup>

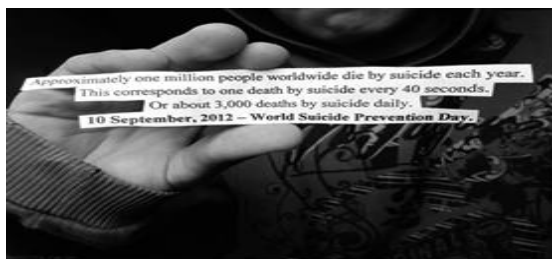


Illustration #2

All the above cases are a direct reflection of how bringing up children has changed for the worse over the years. Parents work hard to take care of the materialistic needs of their children - they buy them expensive gifts and motivate them with promises of mobile phones, i-pads, motor bikes, cars etc., as they want them to fulfill their own ambitions and aspirations. The Emotional Intelligence (EI) of the child is totally neglected.<sup>[10]</sup>

The three main reasons attributed to this problem are Parental pressure on performance, Exam stress and inability to cope with disappointments. Let us examine each of these in some detail:

1. Parental pressure: With increase in levels of education and the growth of middle class families, the expectations of parents from their children have seen a manifold increase. There is also a tendency to achieve through their children what they could not achieve in their lives. This puts enormous pressure on the children who are unable to cope with it. Children as young as 9 years of age have begun to contemplate suicide, believing that if they do not achieve a set standard of academic excellence, their parents will not want them anymore.<sup>[11]</sup> Majority of the parents believe that excellence in education is the only way for success in life. The emphasis on a few disciplines of study, viz., engineering or medicine which still persists in our society makes the parents to push their child towards these disciplines. Hence, without understanding the interest of the child or his/her capabilities, parents push the children into fields of study that the child is ill equipped to excel in; thereby sowing the seeds of non-performance. Research has found that children growing up under strong parental pressures suffer from self-esteem and confidence issues.<sup>[12]</sup> The child might become withdrawn and sullen, which could lead to lack of satisfaction as an adult. Too much pressure from parents also makes the child become doubtful about his/her intelligence and abilities. This hinders their learning and growth to become a Wholesome Human Being.

2. Exam Stress: The situation in the schools is not very different with undue importance given to scholastic achievements. With a skewed Teacher-Student ratio, the Teachers neither have the time, nor the inclination to treat each child as a unique human being and facilitate the child's growth and development. The school's desire to show itself as a high performing institution pushes them to have methods and processes that adds to the child's stress throughout the academic year. The entire focus is on performance in the exams. Added to this is the various tutorials preparing the children for numerous competitive exams. Feeling sick when it is exam time is an indication that the child is stressed out, not about the marks/grade that they will receive, but more about how their parents will react to their performance in the exams. This stress leads to inadequate sleep affecting the mood, learning comprehension and attitude. Additionally the child might feel pressured to cheat.



3. Using many caffeinated substances to help the child stay awake and alert is also not healthy.<sup>[13]</sup>

4. Inability to cope with disappointments: In our society failure is not considered as a learning process. It is seen as the child's inability. This creates an irrational belief that failure means being unsuccessful in life. It is also a yardstick to measure a child's capabilities. Very little to no scope is provided for the child to experiment and take risks in areas that the child might be interested in. Parents in India are found to want their child to excel in all areas. They prepare a tight schedule for the child - school -> tuitions after school -> music classes -> cricket / swimming coaching -> etc. Post these activities the child needs to complete the day's homework in addition to studying for tests, if any. A child, even if s/he feels pressurized with the overload, is very unlikely to voice it for the fear of disapproval from the parents. Children now-a-days are brought up in such a sheltered and restricted environment that they are unable to adapt and adjust to a new environment - change in school, school hostel or college campus. The end result is a stressful situation and when they find they are unable to cope, they look for a means to escape. All these results in the child do not develop a facilitative process to deal with failures and disappointments. This is compounded by this generations need for 'instant gratification'. The parents who can play a supportive role are themselves not equipped to handle such situations. Parents must understand that the age group from 7 to 18 years has low levels of tolerance and get frustrated easily.<sup>[14]</sup>

3. It is also why they respond strongly to humiliation and failure. When children do not get success in what their parents like, the system makes them believe that they are not capable. It is seen that childhood today is no longer a joyful experience; instead lives of children and young adults are full of stress, tension, apprehension, anxiety which many a times leads to depression. Blame it on the life style, modernization, nuclear families, both parents working and so the child is left with the nannies, or in the child care centres, be it anything else – the fact remains that children are deprived of a happy, healthy, loving, caring and facilitative upbringing. A child needs to be a child without having to face the pressures of adult life.<sup>[15]</sup> Behaving like a child is what helps the child to foster creativity and imagination. Facing too much parental pressure can have a lasting negative impact on a child.

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A major part of the growth and development of the child happens in the home where the parents are the primary 'role models'. Children learn from observing and imitating, and therefore parents need to make that extra effort to become aware of themselves with regard to their expectations from their children.

In the above context, it is not out of place to conclude that the growth and development of a child to becoming a 'Wholesome human being' lies in the hands of the parents. Parenting is like being a Gardner. The home is the nursery in which the young minds are tended to till they are ready to be transplanted into the real world. If like the gardener, the parents could provide the right nutrients, environment, and loving care, we can be sure that the children can create a life for themselves in line with their interest's, thereby living a fulfilling life.

A 'Wholesome human being' can create a meaningful life for themselves even in this highly competitive world. Parents have to put in that commitment in providing the necessary nurturing environment which will make their child a 'wholesome human being'.

An approach for wholesome development of a child:

One of the approaches that the author and her husband adopted in bringing up their two children - a boy and a girl, which gave the intended outcomes is detailed below for consideration as one of the possible approaches to bringing up children. This was shared with an online parents group in 2012 since when it

has received appreciation and validation from parents<sup>[16]</sup>.

$E^2 + V = A$  Wholesome Human Being

EDUCATION \* EXPOSURE + VALUE = A WHOLESOME HUMAN BEING

In the area of EDUCATION, it is what the child is interested in and not what the parent's think will be most beneficial for the child. Given the space, inputs and freedom from an early age, it is surprising to see the ability of the children to make decisions beneficial for them. This also facilitates their decision making abilities that are so critical to leading a wholesome life as adults.





In the area of education parents should aim for Learning goals as against Performance goals.<sup>[17]</sup>

Rather than pressurizing the child to perform well in a test, parents should encourage the child to learn from the test. If the child does not perform well in a test, parents should encourage the child to learn from the experience and take corrective actions in future, viz., focused study, getting adequate sleep before the test, etc. This will instill in the child the belief that one can learn from failures as well.

EXPOSURE comes into play in the area of decision making. Children exposed to all possible experience - People, Places, Spirituality, Sports, Hobbies, Art, Literature, etc. during their growing up years also gives an understanding into their natural inclinations, and interest areas. This also inculcates the value of being open to diverse ideas and experiences. Their thinking is more expansive which enhances their personal effectiveness. The importance of free play<sup>[18]</sup> i.e., when a child is allowed to play freely - independent of a teacher or parent directing him/her, the child is able to learn and develop problem solving skills and also develop hobbies and interests. When a child is deprived of independent play, the opportunities and joy of exploring his/her passion is also deprived. Parents providing adequate exposure to their children within their economic strength and ensuring a value based environment, that can build in them the capacity to know what's beneficial both at an "individual" and at the "societal" level, can go a long way in making a Wholesome Human Being of our children.

VALUES are imbibed by the children from the environment that parents create in the home. A strong foundation of values built in the home can enable an individual to withstand any moral 'tsunami' that they might face in their real life as adults. Over indulgent parents are also a reason for children running away from home, claims Chetan Kothari, an RTI activist.<sup>[19]</sup>

If a child is inclined and naturally gifted for academic excellence, s/he will excel in any environment. There are many examples of children coming from challenged environments, studying in difficult conditions and yet excelling in the pursuit of education, sports, music, art, etc.

It is therefore very important that parents pay more attention to the upbringing of children with appropriate nurturing. Parents need to be clear about their core values and parenting choices that will build authentic children, else we will only contribute to raising exhausted, externally driven and emotionally impaired children.<sup>[20]</sup>

Parents should remember that academic excellence is not the ONLY area in a child's life. We have many examples of children naturally gifted and inclined towards achievements, only with their parents understanding and facilitation in the area of their strength's.

Reducing stress in children should be the core for parents and not adding to it, so as to enable them to have joyous childhood and growing up years. Children have a fundamental right to grow happy and healthy. It is possible only if parents can provide a stress free environment for them.

Right from the time a child is born, parents should make sure that they bring up their child in an open stress free happy environment that does not create any kind of pressure on the child. Parents need to spend "Quality Time" with their child to provide them the strong emotional bonding and support.

More than the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), it is the Emotional Quotient (EQ) that enables the child in adulthood. There is no substitute to a parent's love for their child, unconditional and infinite, despite any trials and tribulations, as a contributing factor to the child's growth and development.

I would like to leave the parents with the following thought - "When I approach a child, he inspires in me two sentiments; tenderness for what he is, and respect for what he may become." - Louis Pasteur.

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### **Illustrations:**

1. Drawing of a child with caption. Retrieved from the internet- 02/10/2014
2. Caption of “World suicide day”. Retrieved from the Internet – 02/10/2014