AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Perfectionism and the high-stakes culture of success: The hidden toll on kids and parents

Young people are facing mounting pressure to succeed, and it's causing mental health problems. But there is a solution: mattering

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Key points

- Psychological scientists and other experts are increasingly flagging achievement culture as a contributing factor to youth mental health problems.
- Cultural, educational, and economic shifts appear to be increasing the pressure people feel to achieve, excel, and reach idealized levels of success and perfection.

- A new wave of research is zeroing in on a concept known as mattering that can provide people with a sense of self-worth that is independent of their accomplishments.

Journalist Jennifer Wallace wanted to understand why studies were showing elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and related issues among kids in "high-achieving" schools—a topic she wrote on for *The Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/09/26/students-high-achieving-schools-are-now-named-an-at-risk-group/) in 2019. To learn more, she teamed up with researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to create a survey, which she distributed online to parents through her social networks in February 2020. When she sent it out, she asked recipients to share it with their networks. The goal was to collect 1,000 responses. Within days, there were 6,500.

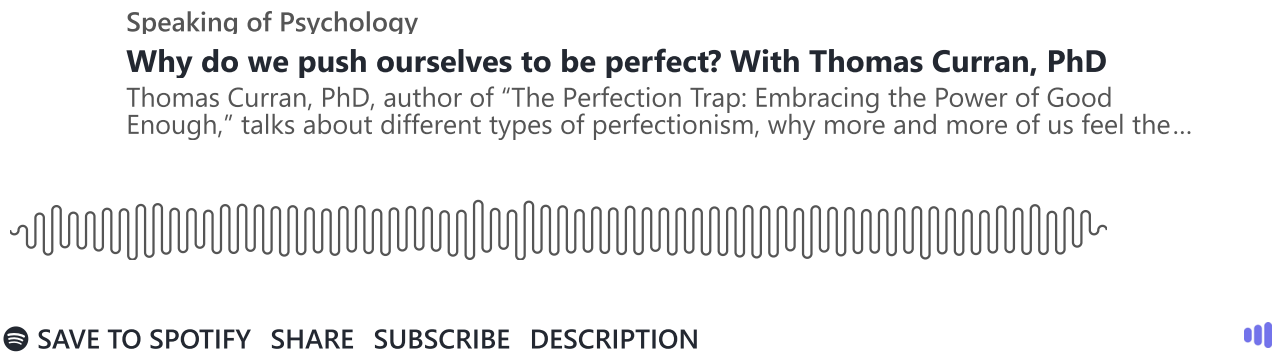
The pressure to succeed, the parents' answers suggested, was contributing to a mental health crisis among young people in the United States, and parents were suffering, too. Among the survey's findings, Wallace said, 73% of respondents agreed that parents in their community believed getting into a selective college is one of the most important ingredients to later life success. Eighty-three percent agreed that their children's academic success is a reflection of their parenting. Yet 87% wished that childhood was less stressful for their kids.

Wallace included the data in her book, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—And What We Can Do About It*, which quickly became a bestseller when it was published in 2023. "It struck a chord," Wallace said. "What parents were saying was, 'Thank you for raising these issues that I've been thinking about, but nobody really wants to talk about.'"

Although the desire to succeed is often a positive motivator, too much pressure to get into a good college, get ahead at work, or fit into an unrealistic mold of perfection can be detrimental to mental health, psychological studies indicate. And, according to a growing body of psychological research, those pressures are growing.

But not everybody succumbs to this kind of "toxic achievement culture," and a new wave of studies is zeroing in on a concept known as mattering that can be protective by providing people with a sense of self-worth independent of their accomplishments. Drawing attention to the issues is an important first step, researchers say.

"This is something of a zeitgeist at the moment. You look at the data, and it just screams at you like, something's happening here," said Thomas Curran, PhD, a social psychologist at the London School of Economics and author of *The Perfection Trap*. "Those concerns, those doubts, those worries, those socially prescribed pressures—they're rising really, really quickly."



Growing pressures

Life has become more challenging for young people over the past 50 years in a variety of ways, according to analyses of social and economic conditions in the industrialized world, which point to a growing emphasis on competition and individualism (Curran, T., & Hill, A. P., *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 145, No. 4, 2019 (https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138)). Along with other cultural forces, these shifts may be increasing the pressure that young people feel to achieve, excel, and reach idealized levels of success and perfection, Curran said. As a result, many feel like they are not good enough, no matter how much they accomplish, ultimately fueling a rise in perfectionistic traits.

To assess long-term changes in the drive toward perfectionism, Curran and research psychologist Andrew Hill, PhD, searched the scientific literature for studies published between 1989 and 2017 that considered characteristics in

college students as measured by standardized questionnaires, which produce scores on the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (https://doi.org/10.1037/t05500-000) . The researchers looked at three known types of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism, a version that describes people who set high self-standards and then strive to reach them; other-oriented perfectionism, which describes the projection of unrealistically high standards onto other people; and socially prescribed perfectionism, which is the perception that other people expect you to be perfect and that you need to meet that demand in order to secure approval.

In an analysis of 246 studies that included more than 41,000 college students in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the researchers found that all three forms of perfectionism had increased over the study's 28-year time span, suggesting that young people are expecting more of themselves and of each other than they used to. Socially prescribed perfectionism spiked most dramatically, showing a 33% increase over the study period. That was more than double the 10% increase seen in self-oriented perfectionism and the 16% rise in other-oriented perfectionism, the researchers found.

Curran is working to update the research, and his new findings, which are still under analysis, suggest that levels of socially prescribed perfectionism continue to rise exponentially. "We're also seeing concerns over mistakes, doubts about actions, things that are sort of corollaries to perfectionism that come with perfectionistic thinking," he said. "They're also rising really, really, really fast."

Overall, perfectionism affects an estimated 25% to 30% of children and adolescents (Flett, G. L., et al., *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, Vol. 34, No. 7, 2016 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282916651381)). And those trends cross many cultures and countries, psychological scientists say. "If there's an achievement culture that involves a sense of needing to be perfect, that seems to be becoming more salient and more widespread," said Gordon Flett, PhD, a research psychologist at York University in Toronto and author of the forthcoming 2025 APA book *Mattering as a Core Need in Children and*

Adolescents: Theoretical, Clinical, and Research Perspectives (/pubs/books/mattering-core-need-children-adolescents) .

As awareness has grown about mental health crises in young people, researchers and clinicians are increasingly flagging achievement culture as one contributing factor. In 2019, Wallace covered two national policy reports that mentioned this kind of pressure as a risk for mental health challenges in young people. More recently, a survey of 1,400 clinicians by *Politico* flagged the pressure to get into college and the pressure to look or be a certain way as contributors to the decline in the well-being of young people—alongside the social comparison inherent in social media, and fear and confusion about the persistence of school shootings.

Too much of a good thing

Cultivating a drive to succeed is important for providing a sense of purpose, meaning, joy, and well-being, experts said. But when people feel like they can't ever live up to expectations, the pursuit of perfection can become detrimental to mental health, leading to disconnection from an internal sense of self-worth.

Some of the biggest concerns come from socially prescribed perfectionism—the kind of social pressure that, Curran's research indicates, is increasing most

quickly. Socially prescribed perfectionism has been linked with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in research that goes back at least 3 decades (*Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 93, No. 102130, 2022 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2022.102130)).

Once considered a concern mostly in affluent communities, the same risks affect students from a variety of backgrounds at high-pressure schools, suggests work by the late Suniya Luthar, PhD, a former professor of psychology at Arizona State University. Her research over more than 20 years documented mental health concerns including risks of alcohol and drug abuse for children in high-achieving, middle-class, and upper-class communities (*Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2005 (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00333.x)).

In nine high-achieving schools assessed between 2015 and 2019, for example, Luthar and colleagues, including Nina Kumar, found in one analysis that rates of clinically significant anxiety and depression were between 6 and 7 times higher than the national average. Rates of "serious withdrawn–depressed and somatic symptoms" were up to 5 times higher than nationally representative groups (*American Psychologist*, Vol. 75, No. 7, 2020 (https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000556)).

A tendency for even extracurricular activities to become resumé-builders contributes to the problem, said Kumar, cofounder of the education research firm Authentic Connections, which conducts surveys in schools to study mental health and resilience. "There is a pervasive sense that students are constantly competing with one another," she said, "which can put pressure on relationships that otherwise would be more supportive."

The relentless need to excel can harm relationships and self-esteem, as people become preoccupied by what others think of them, Curran said. "Not only is perfectionism alienating us from ourselves in the sense that we're trying to be somebody else, somebody perfect, but it also alienates us from other people in

pursuit of higher standards or outperforming others," Curran said. "That creates a lot of loneliness."

In recent years, the literature on perfectionism has exploded, Flett added, and results overwhelmingly point to the same conclusion: Perfectionism is growing, and it can be destructive to mental health. "I used to read absolutely everything voraciously," he said. "Now I could not possibly keep up. Every week, there are another 10, 20 articles."

The roots of achievement culture

A variety of reasons might help explain a growing pressure to be perfect, studies suggest, including the importance of social media in many people's lives. In a survey of nearly 2,000 Austrian, Belgian, Spanish, and South Korean 12- to 19-year-olds, for example, researchers found correlations between Instagram use and the internalization of professional, social, sexual, and romantic ideals. The study linked Facebook use with the internalization of social and romantic ideals. Both Facebook use and the internalization of sexual ideals were related to poor mental well-being, the study found (de Lenne, O., et al., *Media Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2020 (https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2018.1554494)).

"The internet revolution has created a social environment that our brains were not designed to handle, particularly with respect to comparing ourselves to so many other people and being concerned with so many other people's views of us," said social psychologist Mark Leary, PhD, of Duke University. "No matter how well a person is doing in life, there are hordes of others online who seem to be doing better (though they often aren't) and many others who stand ready to be critical and rejecting. As a result, many young people put a great deal of effort into trying to be socially acceptable and gain approval, but it's a never-ending task that is rarely successful."

Looking at images that seem to represent perfect lives fuels a kind of social comparison rumination that can be detrimental for young people, Flett and colleagues wrote in a 2024 study (*Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, Vol.

42, No. 6, 2024 (https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829241238300)). For perfectionists under pressure in an achievement culture, Flett explained, frequent social comparisons of any type can exacerbate feelings that they are falling short of a standard. With social media, it is easier than ever for people to compare their lives with others.

“Those who don’t measure up to peers or the idealized lives of peers portrayed on social media can become cognitively preoccupied,” Flett said. “If I could take a group of children and adolescents and try to strengthen them to cope with current and future challenges, one of the first things I would focus on would be to limit social comparison and keep it from dragging them down.”

In that vein, the APA issued a 2024 report calling for major design improvements to social media platforms (/topics/social-media-internet/youth-social-media-2024) to make them safer for young people. From the age of about 10 until the mid-20s, the report points out, brain development makes people hypersensitive to social feedback and susceptible to harmful content.

Trends in higher education have added to the pressure. Over the past 2 decades, the number of applications to colleges has risen while admissions rates have dropped. At some of the most selective schools, acceptance rates are below 5%. “More people know that they’re going to need to be excellent if they’re going to stand a chance of getting in,” Curran said. “There is a lot of pressure on the students and pressure on the parents, and parents pass the pressure down the chain.”

Parenting is another possible, if contentious, contributing factor to perfectionism and achievement pressure. Psychological science indicates that, driven by the same emphasis on competitiveness and individualism that children are facing, alongside worsening economic conditions, parents have become more anxious, more overly involved, and more controlling. That type of parenting style, often referred to as helicopter parenting, may be pushing young people toward an unhealthy level of perfectionism, Curran and a colleague proposed in a 2022 paper that included two meta-analyses.

Across 21 studies encompassing about 7,000 people, ages 9 to 43, the first analysis indicated more perfectionistic traits, particularly socially prescribed perfectionism, in people who reported having critical parents or parents with higher expectations. The second analysis used data from nearly 24,000 college students in 82 studies and suggested a linear increase in levels of expectations and criticism among parents of college students from 1989 to 2019 (*Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 148, No. 1–2, 2022 (https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000347)).

"We showed a strong correlation between [helicopter] types of parenting styles and perfectionism, and a strong rise in parental expectations among young people," Curran said. "You put the trends together and there's a strong degree of overlap: Parenting is certainly a factor."

Whether that perfectionism comes from wanting attention or wanting to avoid criticism, Flett said, young people often have an underlying sense that they do not matter enough, that they are not worthy of love and approval. And that suggests a solution, he and others say.

The case for mattering

As Wallace started working on her book, she went looking for kids in high-achieving communities who were doing well emotionally despite the pressures. These "healthy strivers," she noticed, experienced setbacks just like other kids did: They bombed tests, were rejected by friends, and did not get into colleges they had their hearts set on. But they were able to bounce back. What appeared most protective, her interviews suggested, was a sense of mattering. The most resilient young people felt that they mattered, not for what they achieved but simply for who they were. "What mattering did is that it acted like a protective shield," she said. "So, these setbacks were just setbacks."

The observation correlates with a growing body of research that links mattering —or the feeling of being valued to loved ones and communities, regardless of external evaluations of "success"—with lower rates of depression and anxiety, a lower likelihood of committing violence, and higher levels of achievement and motivation, said Flett. There is a reason, he added, that the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline suicide prevention slogan (https://youmatter.988lifeline.org/about-you-matter-2/) is "You Matter."

On the flip side, people who feel like they do not matter to the people around them often say they feel invisible or unheard. "It's a such a strong correlation between feelings of not mattering and loneliness," Flett said, "that we have talked about it as a double jeopardy of feeling alone and feeling abjectly insignificant."

And while perfectionism and mattering are closely related (one of the reasons people feel the need to be perfect is that they think they do not matter), feelings of not mattering may be more prevalent than perfectionism, Flett said. Certain people from marginalized groups based on socioeconomics, sexual orientation, and other factors are more prone to feel like they do not matter, and for some this may reflect life experiences (*Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2022 (https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829211057640)).

"Mattering and loneliness are maybe more relatable in a widespread way than perfectionism, even though perfectionism is widespread," Flett said. "When you

put them all together in a sort of Venn diagram, you end up with this really anxious generation."

The pressure to achieve is a systemic issue related to a capitalist society that emphasizes productivity over people, added Grace Kim, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Boston University who studies social justice education and the mental health of Asian Americans. Achievement culture can be particularly fraught for immigrants and people of color, who both are motivated to build a better future and must contend with racism and discrimination, she said. Her work with Asian American academics suggests that societal pressures can be exacerbated by expectations that they do more work to boost representation and fulfill a "model minority" stereotype.

Reducing pressure on marginalized groups in particular, she said, will require policy changes that stop pitting people against each other and instead build a sense of belonging that mirrors the idea of mattering. "If the culture or the structure is not changing, we're always bumping against those kinds of messages," she said. "I don't think the individual-level solution is the way to go."

Strategies to boost mattering

Opportunities to boost mattering begin early in life and are rooted in the kinds of responsive and sensitive interactions that typically foster secure attachments and close connections, Flett said. Emotional neglect and maltreatment in childhood, on the other hand, have been linked with feelings of not mattering among college students (*Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 92, 2016 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.12.014)).

Parents can help their children develop a sense of mattering just by spending plenty of positive time with them, Flett said. The more time, the better, he said, with a focus on engaged and warm interactions that show the parent is interested in the child and paying attention instead of looking at a phone or laptop. It is vital, he said, to listen deeply, to convey that you want to understand what your child is experiencing, and to show that mattering is

unconditional. “Young people need to know that they can make a mistake or have a bad performance and they will still be cared about and accepted and perhaps even prized,” Flett said.

Parents should make time and space to be cared for themselves, Kumar added, while acknowledging the stressors that they and their children are under and emphasizing the importance of kindness and integrity. “If children perceive that their parents value their academic performance above all else, they are more likely to feel that they have to be perfect to ‘earn’ their parents’ affection,” she said.

Leary recommended teaching young people that they will never feel as successful as they want to be online because of the sheer number of people competing for approval and the often critical nature of the internet. “They need to understand that their success and happiness in life depends on the quality of their connections with a handful of people who actually matter in their lives,” he said, “not on all of those other, irrelevant people outside that circle.”

Normalizing setbacks and telling kids that screwing up is just a part of being human are other useful strategies, Curran said. Whether young people have succeeded or failed, it is important to give them consistent messages of approval, recognition, and love. “As soon as you make those things contingent on achievement, which is very easy to do in this culture, then kids start to learn very quickly that they’re only really worth something when they’ve done well, and they are a failure if they haven’t,” Curran said. “That creates a dependency on other people’s approval, which is a very quick way to perfectionism.”

There are also things young people can do to take control of their own resilience and build a sense of self-worth independent of messages they pick up about success. One of the most powerful strategies, studies suggest, is finding a way to make a difference to others through volunteering, mentoring, tutoring, and related activities. Evidence consistently indicates that engaging in these kinds of helpful behaviors builds self-esteem and alleviates depression,

anxiety, and other mental health struggles (Fu, X., et al., *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2017 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.04.002)).

Among gifted and talented students, Flett is finding in his current research that putting their skills to use for society helps alleviate achievement pressures and expectations. Focusing on someone else's well-being, he said, makes people, including children and adolescents, feel useful and appreciated. "I would recommend to any parent who's concerned about a child becoming a workaholic perfectionist who's only focused on achievement," he said, to "try to model going out there and being prosocial and finding some causes."

For her part, Wallace was so moved by what she learned while researching her book that she joined forces with Sarah Bennison, PhD, and other experts to create the Mattering Movement, (https://www.thematteringmovement.com/) which offers a hub of resources, events, and toolkits for parents, teachers, and students, with the goal of boosting mattering to counteract toxic achievement culture.

"Children's resilience rests on the resilience of the adults in their lives. Teachers are the first responders to our kids' struggles in school, and parents are the first responders at home," Wallace said. "As adults, we really need to shore up our own mattering and resilience. We need to prioritize that for ourselves—but also for the kids in our lives."

Further reading

Mattering as a core need in children and adolescents: Theoretical, clinical, and research perspectives (/pubs/books/mattering-core-need-children-adolescents)
Flett, G. L., APA, 2025

Never enough: When achievement culture becomes toxic—and what we can do about it (https://www.amazon.com/Never-Enough-Achievement-Culture-Toxic/dp/0593191862)
Wallace, J. B., *Portfolio*, 2023