



Pressured Parents, Stressed-out Kids: Dealing With Competition While Raising a Successful Child

Wendy S. Grolnick

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It begins harmlessly. Parents chatting on the playground compare their babies' first milestones: "Has Erin started talking? Addy's already using five-word sentences!" Inevitably, Erin's mom and dad feel anxious. Later, as report cards, standardized tests, tryouts, playoffs, auditions and social cliques fill their child's world, parents' anxiety intensifies. The older kids get, the more competition they face, whether in sports, academics or the arts. Hovering in the background is the race for admission to a top-tier college.

To help panicky parents deal with the torrential emotions stirred up by our competitive society, and to give them scientific knowledge about their children's growing years, leading child researcher Wendy Grolnick and educational and parenting journalist Kathy Seal offer this illuminating and accessible guide to channeling competitive anxiety into positive parenting. While evolution has given parents a genetic predisposition toward this protective anxiety whenever their children face today's heightened competition, the authors guide parents to avoid pushing and pressuring, turning their fear instead into calm guidance. Distilling the results of thirty years of research in child psychology, the authors focus on three essential feelings—autonomy, competence, and connectedness—which parents can foster in their children to maximize the child's chances of success and minimize family conflict. They explain that granting kids autonomy lets them feel that they can solve their own problems and are responsible for their own actions. At the same time, providing structure gives kids the guidelines, information, limits, and consequences that they need to act in the world, instilling them with a feeling of competence. Finally, support from adults in the form of time and other resources provides children with a necessary feeling of connection and helps them internalize the ideas and values of their caring parents. Reassuring and empathic, Grolnick and Seal show parents how to avoid the burn-out—in both parents and children—that afflicts so many in our highly competitive society, while raising children who thrive and excel.

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