

HUMAN NATURE REVIEW

ISSN 1476-1084
<http://human-nature.com/>

Book Review

The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life by Michael Thompson with Teresa Barker. A Ballantine Book, Random House Publishing Group, 2004.

Reviewed by

Mark Daims

Michael Thompson, a psychologist by training, has been a high school guidance counselor for many years. In this study, he employs both training and experience siding with the children as they struggle through school. Late in the book he quotes his mentor, a child psychiatrist, Alfred Flarsheim as saying "Every child is doing the best he or she can at every moment." This premise permeates the book; a book that shows that though school can be great for some children, it can be torture for those for whom school is a poor fit. Thompson echoes the sentiment of the children he has worked with who feel that the parents, having forgotten their own school experience, focus primarily on grades and neglect to consider that school encompasses much more than academics.

Human beings are social animals, and we spend an enormous amount of time developing and cultivating our interpersonal relationships. For most children, friends are indeed the reason they get out of bed in the morning, brush their teeth, get dressed, and head for the bus.

School "happens" to children. They must go to school and have little say in how their studies are conducted. This, the author feels, sets up feelings of powerlessness and resentment in many children. Indeed, the school experience may be so difficult that many of today's parents repress their own experience of school and, therefore, sadly lack the empathy they should have for their struggling school-age children.

After twenty years of working. . . with parents and children, I am convinced that one of the greatest barriers to helping children in schools is the fact that parents don't have an accurate view of school. It's paradoxical: since parents spent time in schools when they were kids, they should, theoretically, have such information available. However, it has been my experience that adults have lost touch with the texture and meaning of their own educational experiences. As a result, children feel that their parents are "out of it," that they don't understand. Parents tend to focus on grades. . .

Thompson illustrates the difficulty a child can have in school by following the experiences, in school and on into adulthood, of 9 students (one of whom is one of his own children). These examples also highlight the struggles of the children's parents. For Thompson, there is nothing "wrong" with any of the children. They are quite capable enough; school is the problem. Thompson reminds the reader that school is an institution and, as such, is designed to deal with large numbers of students, not the individual student. Students with individualistic ways of learning or coping can have great difficulty and problems in school that are not their fault. Schooling should be adjusted to fit the child not the reverse. The author recommends, for instance, "mental health days" (days spent at home) for children who just need a break from the pressures of school so they can reflect, adjust, and perhaps recover. Also, there's a lot more going on in school than academics and it is actually those things that the children are most attentive to. The author quotes a twelfth grader:

School isn't too much different from a small country. Each school has its culture, its figureheads, its politics, its lower class, and its oddities. What you get out of it is really not totally yours to control. You live your life and deal with the various twists as they come. By the time it's over you are different in some respects. School changes your life, for better or for worse.

The school culture that a child is engulfed in may be a constant source of fear or anxiety for some children, or, as the author's own daughter says, "You have to put up with a lot of crap in school." School comprises many years of the child's life and, as such, is more like a long-distance race than other competitions. School requires endurance and more endurance for children of some socioeconomic groups than others. "The United States is the only major industrialized nation to spend more on the education of middle-class white students than it does on the education of poor children of color."

Thompson finds parents are often surprised to learn about their children's experiences at school and that schools and parents often do not listen to children because adults feel children dramatize or lie about their experiences. Not so says the author: children are for the greater part being very honest as they describe the distress school causes them. The author passionately asks us to listen to children, especially about their particular and unique experiences

Besides being unsympathetic to their children's school experience, parents often exacerbate their child's difficulties by assuming their child is either working hard enough or not and that school is simply a matter of effort. They may also place undo emphasis on going to a "good" college and add another of a host of pressures placed on children, undo pressures that do not match the importance of the goal. College is important, but the author asks what happened to the goal of achieving adulthood and maturity. College supersedes other more important aspirations.

I want to repeat my previous assertion that growing up and getting out of school are the true developmental goals of every late adolescent. College is not, in and of itself, an intrinsic goal. After all, viewed from the point of view of students, college is just more school. Getting into another school is a momentary achievement, while feeling grown up is something substantial, something that is part of you.

Ultimately, Thompson feels that children have their own wisdom and that it would be wise of us adults to listen to them. He has listened and he has related the stories of nine children as they struggle with school. These stories combined with the author's arguments on the subject present a compelling case against the pressures placed on children in schools and for more compassionate parenting as regards school and the inner life of the child.

Author

Mark Daims, DVM, Hudson, New York, USA.