

# In praise of the ordinary child

It's time to rethink what it means  
to be exceptional—and whether being  
No. 1 is worth pursuing at all.

By Jeffrey Kluger

IF YOU'VE GOT KIDS, here's a nasty truth: they're probably not very special—as in, they're ordinary, average, unremarkable. Consider the numbers—those applications your daughter is sending to Ivy League schools, for instance. There are more than a quarter of a million other kids aiming for the same eight colleges at the same time, and less than 9% of them will make the cut. And those hours you spend coaching Little League because you just know your son's sweet swing will take him to the pros? There are 2.4 million other Little Leaguers out there, and there are exactly 750 openings for major league ballplayers at the beginning of each season. That gives him a 0.0313% chance of reaching the bigs. The odds are just as long for the other dreams you've had for your kids: your child the billionaire, the Broadway star, the Rhodes scholar. Most of those things are never going to happen.

If there was a time Americans were able to make peace with odds like these, that time has passed. Judging by the behavior of modern parents, we are living in a Lake Wobegon nation, where all children are above average, destined for the professional and educational 1% if they work hard enough.

The kids are paying the price for parents' delusions. In public schools, some students are bringing home 17.5 hours of homework per week (or 3.5 per school night)—and it's hard to see how they have time to do it.

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE BLACKMON



From 2004 to 2014, the number of children participating in up to three hours of after-school activities on any given day rose from 6.5 million to 10.2 million. And all the while, the kids are being fed a promise—that they can be tutored and coached, pushed and tested, hotheaded and advanced-placed until success is assured. “Some kids in elementary school find out they’re not among the best at something, and it seems dire to them,” says Richard Weissbourd, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of the book *The Parents We Mean to Be*.

At last, a growing chorus of educators and psychologists is saying, *Enough!* Somewhere between the self-esteem building of going for the gold and the self-esteem crushing of the Ivy-or-die ethos there has to be a place where kids can breathe, where they can have the freedom to do what they love—and where parents accustomed to pushing their children to excel can shake off the newly defined shame of having raised an ordinary child. No one is arguing for a generation of mediocre or underachieving kids—but plenty of people have begun arguing for a redefinition of what it means to achieve at all.

**IF THE SYSTEM** is going to be fixed, it has to start, no surprise, with the parents. For them, the problem isn’t merely the expense of the tutors, the chore of the homework checking and the constant search for just the right summer program. It’s also the sweat equity that comes from agonizing over every exam, grieving over every disappointing grade—becoming less a guide in a child’s academic career than an intimate fellow traveler.

“It’s a contagion,” says Weissbourd. “You see it in this arms race to get kids into selective colleges. A neighbor’s kid has an SAT tutor in eighth grade, so you think you’re denying your own kid if you don’t do the same.”

As with any contagion, not every part of the population is equally affected. The 1% child is an effect of an economic stratum that is either accustomed to wealth or feels entitled to it—and has at least enough disposable income to afford the classes and coaches that the pursuit requires. “There are racial, class and cultural differences involved,” says Weiss-



bourd. “In many working-class and immigrant families, for example, you tend not to see children being told they’re special all the time. There’s more of a collective responsibility.”

The first step for parents is accepting that they have less control over their children’s education than they think they do—a reality that can be both sobering and liberating. You can sign your kids up for ballet camp or violin immersion all you want, but if they’re simply doing what they’re told instead of doing what they love, they’ll take it only so far.

There’s a difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, says Brad Bushman, a professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University. “The interest has to come from within.”

When it doesn’t, the kids rebel, though often only after they’ve devoted a lot of years to something they didn’t really care about much in the first place. Bushman saw this in his own family when his daughter, who had worked for nearly six years to earn her black belt in the tang soo do martial-arts program, simply up

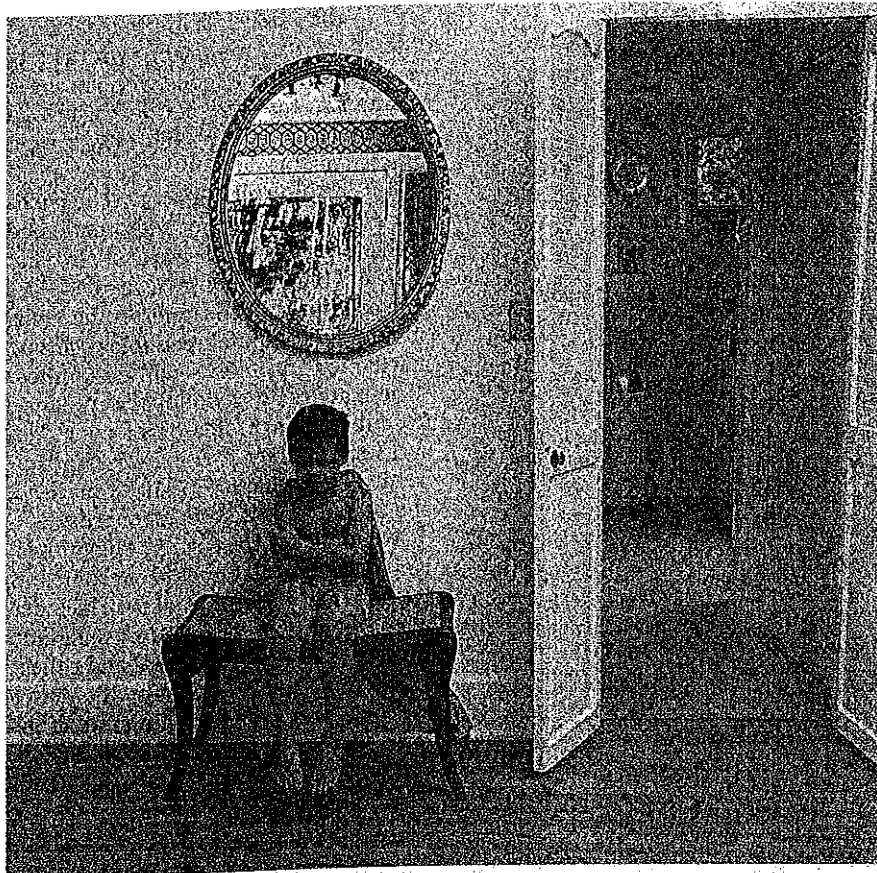
and quit six weeks before the end. “Nothing we did could convince her,” he says.

When it comes to AP courses or other accelerated academics, it’s easier still to throw the fight: just flunk the course. Parents can enforce study time rigorously, but when test time comes, they can’t order up an A. “How do you know when to back off?” says Bushman. “When the kid’s motivation drops.”

When it comes to college, it’s also important that even the most aggressive tiger parents quit fetishizing the glamour schools. There’s a reason nearly 890,000 international students attended college in the U.S. in 2014, and it’s that so many of those schools are so good. “The vast majority of state schools in the U.S. provide an excellent education,” says Nancy Hill, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “You can thrive academically there, and you can flounder at an Ivy.”

Parents also have to become more accepting and supportive of what their kids choose to study once they get to college. It’s possible to raise a miserable

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...billionaire, just as it's possible to raise a happy shop owner or social worker.

"The question is how we broaden the definition of *exceptional*," says Hill. "Kids can persist with something difficult or boring only if they can connect with how it's making them what they want to be."

**ONE APPROACH**, developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and now in use in about 800 schools nationwide, is known as RULER, which sees emotional growth as key to academic and creative development. The letters in the acronym stand for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating emotions and their consequences. And while that has a whiff of the free-form, no-grades, everybody-hug educational ethos of the 1960s and '70s, there's a lot of civilizing rigor built into the program.

The RULER approach is in use in a wide range of schools, from the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School in Harlem to Aidan Montessori in Washington, D.C., and those in the Seattle and

Bellevue school districts of Washington State. In all of these places, says Marc Brackett, a Yale child-development specialist and co-creator of RULER, the goal is to foster emotional intelligence and balance motivation, talent and goals. That, in turn, can help students think about where their strengths lie.

"Whenever you look at people who are successful—say, a soccer star—they're practicing 10 hours a day. They take their soccer ball to bed with them," Brackett says. "So one question is, What is your level of commitment? And what are the odds?" The same strategy can be ap-

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plied for any child marching—willingly or not—along the 1% trail.

Handled badly, questions like that can smother motivation in kids who really do have the goods. Handled well, however, they can help those kids focus, as well as gently, supportively redirect other kids whose energies could be more rewardingly spent elsewhere. "You want children to dream and have a vision," Brackett says. "But you also want them to have the emotional education to strategize accordingly."

Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based youth-development research group—offers its own multipoint approach that differs from RULER in structure but is similar in goals. It too is built around first considering what kids' natural interests and talents are, then helping them find ways to achieve their long-term goals.

"Children have to feel they have a voice; that they have age-appropriate autonomy and agency," says Search Institute CEO Kent Pekel. "This allows them to find their own spark. You want to put them on a path to thrive."

**THERE'S NO CONSENSUS** on exactly what gave rise to the era of the superchild, but the economy is surely part of it. The stock market swings of the 1980s were followed by the tech boom of the '90s, which led to the tech collapse of the aughts, which was followed, finally, by the great, tectonic crash of 2008. Through all that, the American middle class grew smaller and smaller while the rungs on the economic ladder grew ever farther apart. If their kids were going to get ahead, many parents felt, they would have to be bred to be failure-proof.

"Parents began trying to find some stable, reliable path," says psychologist Jean Twenge of San Diego State University, the author of *Generation Me*. "You're not going to raise Steve Jobs, but you can get your child into Cornell."

And so parents push. Let a child exhibit a flicker of talent for math and she's suddenly on the precalculus track. Show even the slightest interest in music or sports and some adult comes along and boils off the joy. "You get kids involved in dance or gymnastics or chess, and the coaches get so excited about the talent they're seeing that they push too hard, and in some ways it cuts off children's interests," says

psychologist and child-development expert Laurie Kramer of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "We force kids to focus prematurely."

More often than not, the kids go along, partly because they're told to, but partly because they've bought into the idea that the 1% is where they belong. The self-esteem movement that started in the 1970s has been an unalloyed good for children who would otherwise be marginalized, physically, developmentally or socially. But it's had some unintended consequences, ushering in the era of relentless praise, in which everyone gets a medal just for showing up.

"We've assumed self-esteem is the cure for all social ills," says Bushman. "So we throw out blanket praise. What we should do is wait for kids to do well and then praise them."

In 2014, Bushman was a co-author of a paper with psychologist Eddie Brummelman of Utrecht University in the Netherlands cheekily called "That's Not Just Beautiful—That's Incredibly Beautiful!" exploring the risks of overpraising small children. The study found that inflated praise can actually make kids feel worse rather than better by raising the pressure to keep performing at unrealistic levels. That, in turn, can make them reluctant to take on further challenges lest they underachieve next time.

Remarkably, even when the kids aren't around, the parents continue the applause, if only in their own minds. Studies have shown that adults routinely overestimate their children's IQs—which may not be much of a surprise—but they also believe their kids possess knowledge that they don't have.

All this, Brummelman says, can lead parents to reach a state of emotional "enmeshment" with their children. "Parents begin to see their children as part of their own identity," he says, "and their kids' ambitions become their own."

Ultimately all of this can come crashing down, not least by raising expectations that will inevitably be dashed. That blow comes to the children before it comes to their parents. By simple operation of the academic selection process, the higher you climb, the tougher the competition gets, so that even if you really were in the top 1% of your undergraduate class, by the time you get to grad

## Great expectations

261,157

Number of applications received by the eight Ivy League schools for the incoming class of 2019

8.6%

Overall acceptance rate at Ivy League schools—otherwise known as a 91.4% rejection rate

17.5

Hours of homework some U.S. public school students bring home per week, or 3.5 hours per school night

70%

Share of students who consider themselves above average in academic ability—a mathematical impossibility



school you may find yourself surrounded by nothing but other one-percenters.

"A lot of them crash," Weissbourd says. "It's a real mental-health issue."

Worse, the students don't even know how to ask for help. Having been so painstakingly raised and tended from birth, a student may arrive at college as a kind of temperamental orchid, one that can't possibly survive in the wild. "They don't get that they're just one of thousands of students," says Kramer. "There's a desire for immediate feedback. You hear a lot of 'My professor didn't call me back by 11 a.m.! Do something about it!'"

ULTIMATELY, there's a much larger national conversation that needs to be had about just what higher education means and when it's needed at all. Four years of college has been sold as being a golden ticket in the American economy, and to an extent that's true. The unemployment rate in June 2015 was 5.3% nationwide, but it was just 2.5% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher, 5.4% for high school grads and an unhappy 8.2% for those without a high school diploma.

Numbers like those have driven all the talk about the so-called million-dollar

payoff—the ostensible lifetime-earnings difference between someone with a four-year degree and someone without one—and the B.A.-for-everyone ideal, which argues for a full undergraduate degree as a national birthright.

But pushing all kids down the bachelor's path ensures not only that some of them will lose their way but also that critical jobs that require a two-year degree or less—skilled trades, some kinds of nursing, computer technology, airline mechanics and more—will go unfilled. "These are really good jobs," says James Rosenbaum, a professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University, "jobs that let you use your head, and they're jobs that society needs."

Not only has the current exceptionalism made jobs like that seem somehow less worthy, but they're not even included on the menu of possibilities for some kids. "When I talk to high school and college counselors," says Rosenbaum, "they often say that parents or administrators get angry if they discuss associate's or sub-baccalaureate degrees with students. They're told it lowers expectations."

Twenge cites studies showing that a lot of students who begin their work on an associate's degree do it merely so they can roll their credits over into a bachelor's. That means taking only general-requirement courses, getting trained for no job in particular and coming out of their two-year experience knowing what they knew when they went in, which is that the full four years was never for them. "We don't need everybody to be a lawyer," Twenge says. "We need to capitalize on everyone's individual talent."

There will never be a case to be made for a culture of academic complacency or the demolition of the meritocracy. It can be fulfilling for kids to chase a ribbon, as long as it's a ribbon the child really wants. And the very act of making that effort can bring out the best in anyone's work.

But we cheat ourselves, and, worse, we cheat our kids, if we view life as a single straight-line race in which one one-hundredth of the competitors finish in the money and everyone else loses. We will all be better off if we recognize that there are a great many races of varying lengths and outcomes. The challenge for parents is to help their children find the one that's right for them.