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Sometimes 'poor little rich kids' really are poor little rich kids

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The "affluenza" defense of Ethan Couch, a 16-year-old Texas boy who killed four pedestrians while driving drunk, has received a great deal of ridicule, much of it justified. That said, it would be foolish to allow an absurd effort to minimize one teenager's responsibility for a horrific tragedy to obscure growing evidence that we have a significant and growing crisis on our hands. The children of the affluent are becoming increasingly troubled, reckless, and self-destructive. Perhaps we needn't feel sorry for these "poor little rich kids." But if we don't do something about their problems, they will become everyone's problems.

One of us has spent about 20 years studying and documenting the growth of [dysfunction among affluent youth](#), and the other has written about one large [source of the problem](#). High-risk behavior, including extreme substance abuse and promiscuous sex, is growing fast among young people from communities dominated by white-collar, well-educated parents. These kids attend schools distinguished by rich academic curricula, high standardized test scores, and diverse extracurricular opportunities. Their parents' annual income, at \$150,000 and more, is well over twice the national average. And yet they show serious levels of maladjustment as teens, displaying problems that tend to begin as they enter adolescence and get worse as they approach college.

What kinds of problems? First, marijuana and alcohol abuse, including binge drinking. Studies show that drug and alcohol use is higher among affluent teens than their inner-city counterparts. And surveys have revealed that full-time college students are two and a half times more likely to experience substance abuse or dependence than members of the general population. Half of all full-time college students reported binge drinking and abuse of illegal or prescription drugs.

Second, though crime is widely assumed to be a problem of youth in poverty, the data suggest comparable levels of delinquency among well-off suburban students. What does differ is the type of rule-breaking — widespread cheating and random acts of delinquency such as stealing from parents or peers among the affluent, as opposed to behavior related to self-defense, such as carrying a weapon, among the inner-city teens.

Finally, there is a psychological toll. The proportion of affluent youth indicating serious levels of depression or anxiety is two to three times national rates, and levels of eating disorders and self-injurious behaviors far exceed national averages.

So substance abuse, antisocial behavior and psychological disorder are the “what” of affluent youth. What about the “why”? In the case of the Texas teenager, Ethan Couch, [published reports](#) suggest a great deal of neglect by parents who were preoccupied with marital problems. Undoubtedly, parents’ lack of limit-setting can play a role; some upper-middle class parents fail to enforce appropriate discipline, even for egregious misbehaviors. As many as one in five affluent youth believe that their parents would bail them out if school or legal authorities threatened serious disciplinary action.

But parental indulgence is by no means the only factor. The peer culture in upwardly mobile communities plays a major role, actively endorsing substance use. High levels of drinking and drug use, especially among boys, is linked with high status in the peer group. It’s the popular kids who chug six-packs after school football games.

Yet, more than parents or peers, we believe that the major culprit is pressure experienced by youth to distinguish themselves, to be at the top. Don’t just play soccer because it’s fun — make the traveling team. Don’t just learn to play piano — be featured at the recital. And don’t just do well in school. Outcompete your similarly privileged schoolmates to get the prized slot at Harvard, or Stanford, or Swarthmore.

The children of affluent parents expect to excel at school and in multiple extracurriculars and also in their social lives. They feel a relentless sense of pressure that plays out in excessive substance use, and also in the other problems we’ve documented: high anxiety and depression about anticipated or perceived achievement “failures,” and random acts of delinquency.

It’s true that pressure to do well in school and get into a prestigious college is shared by many teens. But maintaining the mantle of success is especially [urgent among the affluent](#). Upper middle class youth want to meet the standard of living they are used to — in their own homes, and in the homes of their friends in the community. What’s more, achievement of their extremely lofty goals is enticingly within reach. Parents fervently acquire whatever coaching is needed to help their children achieve distinction — whether it is in test scores, tennis skills, or musical performance. And when they are given all manner of expensive help, the kids feel compelled to excel. Everything they do is aimed at achieving the “best.”

Parents are not the only ones creating lofty, often unrealistic expectations. In high-achieving schools whose graduates commonly head to the best colleges, students can face inexorably high standards of performance from teachers, guidance counselors, and sports coaches. They are expected to excel in each of their activities toward achieving that glowing resume.

Why is it that high socioeconomic status brings more risk for young people today than it once did? First, the ultimate goal of getting into a good college is much more competitive today than it used to be. Among top-tier colleges, the number of applicants has doubled or tripled over the last five years, with the number of international applications increasing 25 percent over the last four years.

Second, the range of possibilities that life offers has exploded. There are so many things to do, and so many ways to be, and there is nothing stopping you (if you’re affluent) except you, yourself. Affluence leads people to believe they are wholly responsible for their own success or

failure. The wealthier people become, the more they believe that they can control most aspects of their lives and design exactly the kinds of lives they want. They come to expect perfection. This is a double illusion, since neither complete control nor perfection is possible.

What can we do to begin to stanch these problems? First, we, upper middle class parents, need to be resolute about appropriate limit-setting, and not succumb to fears about incurring the wrath of our teenage kids, or allowing a blemish on the child's school records. Second, we have to watch very carefully for our achievement expectations. If our children come to feel that our love for them is integrally tied to the splendor of their accomplishments, they will inevitably become deeply anxious about failing, and disappointing us. Third, we have to watch out for our [own emotional well-being](#). A psychologically depleted, exhausted parent cannot rise to the many challenges that parenting inevitably demands. And affluent parents tend to be more reluctant than others to admitting to distress: after all, those at the top should be better able to cope than others.

We also urgently need action from educators. K-12 schools need to look at the degree to which they truly value their students' all-round well-being, and not just their achievements, grit, and perseverance. They need to help their students see that there are multiple options for them in life, rather than pushing toward the most challenging, competitive colleges and careers. Students need to assess the price they could be paying for the relentless pursuit of affluence, status, and power.

Ultimately, we need change in higher education. One of us has [argued for a lottery](#) system in admissions to highly selective institutions, in which all applicants who are "good enough" to succeed get their names put in a hat, with the winners drawn at random. Such a system would prick the pressure balloon of high school, since students would no longer have to be the "best." They would have to be good enough...and a little lucky.

The problems of kids in affluence are real; their vulnerabilities derive from multiple sources and not just from "irresponsible parents"; preventing these problems requires work at multiple levels, including families and communities, schools and universities. Many of these upwardly mobile youth will assume positions of power and influence as adults. For their own sakes, and for the sakes of all they will come to influence as adults, we must attend to their struggles thoughtfully, and with compassion. Above all, we must avoid dismissing them as simply being "spoiled rich brats."