

# Positive Schools 2017

The Cost of Excellence in Childhood



Richard Pengelley

# What was your experience

Reflect, in a moment of mindfulness, from your own life about;

- ▶ A childhood experience of success
- ▶ A childhood experience of failure
- ▶ Who told you; praise/criticism, what did it feel like
- ▶ Recall a time you've built up a child's success or told them of their failure. What was the outcome?
- ▶ What have you excelled at, the positives and negatives of that



# Context



- ▶ There is nothing inherently wrong with excellence
- ▶ Hard work and striving towards goals is important in life
- ▶ Parents and children will always “dance” around who owns the goals, when to sit back and when to push, who’s “driving the bus”
- ▶ I’m really talking about ‘forced excellence’ - parent’s ambition, not in the child’s nature
- ▶ Children need to learn resilience and grow into realistic expectations
- ▶ Mediocrity can lead to the regret of unfulfilled potential
- ▶ Too much choice can “water down” commitment
- ▶ My work has been mainly with the privileged, different issues with disadvantaged

# A case study

- ▶ Young boy who came to Australia in 1966 aged 6
- ▶ Followed older siblings into swimming training 2x/day by age 8
- ▶ Typical school day, holiday pattern of 3x/day
- ▶ Weekly competition, LOTS of medals, certificates, ribbons & trophies
- ▶ Learned to be a 'performing seal', life above water conditional, safe below
- ▶ Unhappy teens, no social life, extreme introversion made worse
- ▶ Goal oriented existence, Olympic Games, 'Olympic' model of living
- ▶ Struggle between in/ex-trinsic rewards and motivations
- ▶ 'Hall of fame' in family passageway
- ▶ Very hard to 'come down from the mountain', engage normal life
- ▶ Complex relationships with parents/coaches

# The Conversation

Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., a child psychiatrist in, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, writes;

"**Overscheduling** our children is not only a widespread phenomenon, it's how we parent today. Parents feel remiss that they're not being good parents if their kids aren't in all kinds of activities. **Children are under pressure to achieve**, to be competitive. I know sixth-graders who are already working on their résumés so they'll have an edge when they apply for college."



"Many children today **don't have time to breathe**. Parents think their kids will grow up and remember all the wonderful activities they were involved in," adds Melanie Coughlin, M.A., a family therapist and adjunct professor at California's Pepperdine University.

Coughlin, who counsels parents and children in private practice, thinks children "will remember **how exhausted** they were and how their **parents were constantly yelling at them** to hurry up and get ready for the next activity."

From *Psychology Today*, David Elkins, 2003.



# The School context

- ▶ Private vs public
- ▶ Addiction to final exams
- ▶ School comparison tables
- ▶ Tyranny of timetables, bells, compressed days
- ▶ Funding models - results bring money
- ▶ Enough pressure just growing up
- ▶ Standardised testing and reporting dominate
- ▶ Busy/stressed teachers & admin's = busy/stressed kids
- ▶ Comments after service learning trips
- ▶ Difficulties faced by super high achievers later in life



# “After the Game”

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/after-the-game-promo/8477046>

from ABC Four Corners report 1 May 2017

Retired elite athletes shared stories of the let down from excellence;

- *"You literally go from the very peak of your career, being the best at something, to dirt."* Former Olympian & Commonwealth Gold Medallist
- *"I felt like I was a failure again. That I couldn't achieve anything. I couldn't do basic things."* Former Test Cricket Player

One elite swimmer tells of how she went from being ranked number one in the world to queuing for the dole.

- *"I applied for pretty much every job under the sun. I applied for packing shelves in shopping centres and the comment is: 'oh what do you need a job for?'"* Former Olympian & Commonwealth Gold Medallist
- Former Wallaby Dan Vickerman took his own life in February. In moving interviews his friends reflect on the challenges of life after sport and the painful soul searching they've been through since his death.

# The costs

- ▶ In doing too much, depth is sacrificed for breadth
- ▶ Increased, unnecessary stress levels
- ▶ Not enough time to play in a natural, creative way
- ▶ No relaxed, enjoyable downtime with family members
- ▶ Less contact with extended family, often come just to see you perform
- ▶ Reduced self awareness, not time to fantasise, experiment with self discovery
- ▶ Friends from same “culture”, also stressed, often competitors
- ▶ Hard to take an interest in others, the world, get a perspective on life
- ▶ Driven by extrinsic rewards
- ▶ Post success issues, potential risk and ‘need help to relax’ takers
- ▶ Others?

# What drives parents to push so hard?

Most parents have good intentions. We enrol our kids in activities because we **want them to have a rich, happy childhood**. We sacrifice our time and money to make sure they're at training and competitions. We love our kids and don't **WANT** them to be stressed.

However, some push their children to succeed in the **interest of their own egos**. Others use them to **relive their own childhood dreams**. Others are motivated by **social pressure**. Notes one mum, "All the kids near us are involved in 4 or 5 activities. If I withdrew my kids, they'd feel left out, and I'd feel neglectful around the other parents."

A grandfather reflects on his own childhood: "When I was a boy, I played football at school and some baseball in the summer. That was it. **I never felt deprived** or thought my parents didn't love me. Today, I think a lot of young parents are scared to death that their kids will grow up and tell their therapist, 'I'm here because my parents didn't love me. They limited my extracurricular activities.'



# Nicholson's "Theory of Loose Parts", 1972

- ▶ *'In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.'*
- ▶ *'Children learn most readily and easily in environments where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves. It takes time and must not be pressured.'*
- ▶ **Claire Warden and "Nature Pedagogy";** *An environment which is rich in open-ended and real materials (loose elements), invokes children to experiment, engage, construct and invent; invites them to tinker, to manipulate and to play. And it's fun!*

<http://www.claire-warden.com/nature-pedagogy/>



# Let's have a conversation

- ▶ Your experiences
- ▶ Your thoughts
- ▶ Your fears
- ▶ Your context
- ▶ How is it different for disadvantaged kids
- ▶ What excites you in education
- ▶ Had Pos Ed had any impact
- ▶ Your suggestions



# What we need to reclaim

- ▶ R - est awhile
- ▶ E - asy does it
- ▶ L - earn from nature
- ▶ A - is for artistry rather than achievement
- ▶ X - cel at doing nothing, after all we are human **beings**  
not human **doings**



*For Sally Amis*

Tightly-folded bud, I have wished you something  
None of the others would: not the usual stuff  
About being beautiful, or running off a spring  
Of innocence and love – they will all wish you that,  
And should it prove possible, well, you're a lucky girl.

But if it shouldn't, then may you be ordinary;  
Have, like other women, an average of talents:  
Not ugly, not good-looking, nothing uncustomary  
To pull you off your balance,  
That, unworkable itself, stops all the rest from working.  
In fact, may you be dull – if that is what a skilled,  
Vigilant, flexible, unemphasised, enthralled  
Catching of happiness is called.

*“Born Yesterday” by Philip Larkin*