

# Positive Schools 2015

The Cost of Excellence in Childhood



Richard  
Pengelley

# Context

- ▶ There is nothing inherently wrong with excellence
- ▶ Hard work and striving towards goals is important
- ▶ Parents and children will always “dance” around who owns the goals, when to sit back and when to push, who’s “driving the bus”
- ▶ Children need to learn resilience and grow into realistic expectations
- ▶ Mediocrity, like excellence, can lead to regret (of unfulfilled potential)
- ▶ Too much choice can “water down” commitment



*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*

# A case study

- ▶ 10 pound Pom, 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/extrinsic rewards and motivations
- ▶ 'Hall of fame' in family passageway
- ▶ Very hard to 'come down from the mountain', engage normal family life

# 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 licensed marriage and 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 WACE/ATAR
- ▶ League tables
- ▶ Tyranny of timetables, bells
- ▶ Funding models
- ▶ Enough pressure just growing up
- ▶ Busy/stressed teachers & admin's = busy/stressed kids
- ▶ Comments after service learning trips



# The costs

- ▶ 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 just see you perform)
- ▶ Reduced self awareness that comes with creativity, time to fantasize, 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 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."

# Let's have a conversation

- ▶ Your experiences
- ▶ Your thoughts
- ▶ Your fears
- ▶ The school context
- ▶ Your suggestions



# What we need to reclaim

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



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