

School Stress Takes A Toll On Health, Teens And Parents Say

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When high school junior Nora Huynh got her report card, she was devastated to see that she didn't get a perfect 4.0.

Nora “had a total meltdown, cried for hours,” her mother, Jennie Huynh of Alameda, Calif., says. “I couldn't believe her reaction.”

Nora is doing college-level work, her mother says, but many of her friends are taking enough advanced classes to boost their grade-point averages above 4.0. “It breaks my heart to see her upset when she's doing so awesome and going above and beyond.”

And the pressure is taking a physical toll, too. At age 16, Nora is tired, is increasingly irritated with her siblings and often suffers headaches, her mother says.

Parents are right to be worried about stress and their children's health, says Mary Alvord, a clinical psychologist in Maryland and public education coordinator for the American Psychological Association.

“A little stress is a good thing,” Alvord says. “It can motivate students to be organized. But too much stress can backfire.”

Almost 40 percent of parents say their high-schooler is experiencing a lot of stress from school, according to a new NPR poll conducted with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health. In most cases, that stress is from academics, not social issues, or bullying, the poll found.

Homework was a leading cause of stress, with 24 percent of parents saying it's an issue. Teenagers say they're suffering, too. A survey by the American Psychological Association found that nearly half of all teens — 45 percent — said they were stressed by school pressures.

Chronic stress can cause a sense of panic and paralysis, Alvord says. The child feels stuck, which only adds to the feeling of stress.

Parents can help put the child's distress in perspective, particularly when they get into what Alvord calls catastrophic “what if” thinking: “What if I get a bad grade, then what if that means I fail the course, then I'll never get into college.”

Then move beyond talking and do something about it.

That's what 16-year-old Colleen Frainey of Tualatin, Ore., did. As a sophomore last year, she was taking all advanced courses. The pressure was making her sick. “I didn't feel good, and when I didn't feel good I felt like I couldn't do my work, which would stress me out more,” she says.

Mom Abigail Frainey says, “It was more than we could handle as a family.”

With encouragement from her parents, Colleen dropped one of her advanced courses. The family's decision generated disbelief from other parents. “Why would I let her take the easy way out?” Abigail Frainey heard.

But she says dialing down on academics was absolutely the right decision for her child. Colleen no longer suffers headaches or stomachaches. She's still in honors courses, but the workload this year is manageable.

Even better, Colleen now has time to do things she never would have considered last year, like going out to dinner with the family on a weeknight, or going to the barn to ride her horse, Bishop.

Psychologist Alvord says a balanced life should be the goal for all families. If a child is having trouble getting things done, parents can help plan the week, deciding what's important and what's optional. “Just basic time management — that will help reduce the stress.”