

How Adults Shape the Pressure

A 90-minute workshop on the role adults play in achievement culture

FOR PARENTS, COACHES, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOL COUNSELORS

WELCOME AND OBJECTIVE

This workshop invites honest reflection on the ways adults, often with the best intentions, contribute to the very pressure they want to relieve. It is not about assigning guilt. It is about developing the self-awareness to do better.

OVERVIEW

Achievement culture does not just live in students. It lives in how adults talk about grades, college, success, and failure at the dinner table and on the sideline. Before we can change the environment for young people, we have to look honestly at what we are contributing to it.

RESEARCH

17x

more likely to experience depressive symptoms: students who learn their worth depends on performance, a direct pathway to perfectionism, chronic anxiety, and depression.

80%

of college students report basing self-worth on grades and appearance. This pattern is directly linked to higher rates of anxiety and depression.

EXERCISE 1 — AUDITING OUR LANGUAGE (INDIVIDUAL, 20 MIN)

Review the list of common phrases adults use with young people. For each one, flag whether it ties a student's worth to an outcome. Then rewrite the ones that do. The goal is not to stop caring about achievement. It is to separate achievement from identity.

- “I’m so proud of you for getting that grade.”
- “You’re so smart — this should be easy for you.”
- “You can do better than that.”
- “What happened?” (after a disappointing result)
- “I know you worked hard on this.”

EXERCISE 2 — CASE STUDY (SMALL GROUPS, 20 MIN)

A high-achieving student is visibly burning out. She is still performing, but the people who know her can see the cost. Her parents and coaches continue to encourage more. Discuss: what is the responsible response here? Who has standing to say something? What do you actually say?

DISCUSSION

Where does supporting excellence end and applying harmful pressure begin? This is not a rhetorical question. It has a real answer in each specific relationship, and it is worth working toward.

CLOSING

Each participant writes down one thing they want to stop saying and one thing they want to start saying instead. Keep it honest. Vague commitments do not stick.