The rich kids are not all right

By **Suniya Luthar**

It is often thought that children of privilege have an easy ride through life, but it may be time to reassess the stresses they face.

Wealth of opportunities: children from upper middle class families seem to struggle with a multitude of pressures.

It is widely accepted in the US that youth in poverty are a population at risk for being troubled. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that low family income is a major determinant of protracted stress and social, emotional, and behavioural problems. Experiencing poverty before age five is especially associated with negative outcomes.

But increasingly, significant problems are occurring at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, among youth en route to the most prestigious universities and well-paying, high-status careers in America. These are young people from communities dominated by white-collar, well-educated parents.

They attend schools distinguished by rich academic curriculums, high standardised test scores, and diverse extracurricular opportunities. The 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 get worse as they approach college.

My first glimpse of this phenomenon was entirely serendipitous. In the mid-1990s, I was recruiting youth in a prosperous suburban community as a comparison sample for a study of inner-city teens. Much to my surprise, the affluent teens turned out to fare significantly more poorly than their counterparts of low socio-economic status on all indicators of substance use, including hard drugs. I later replicated those findings among 10th-graders in a different suburb. And other researchers have since corroborated the findings of high alcohol use, binge drinking, and marijuana use among offspring of well-educated, white, high-income, two-parent families.

But substance use is not the only errant behaviour among children of privilege. Crime is also widely assumed to be a problem of youth in poverty, but I have found comparable levels of wrongdoing among well-off suburban students and inner-city youth. What does differ are the types of rule-breaking. Widespread cheating and random acts of delinquency, such as stealing from parents or peers, are more common among the rich, while inner-city teens are apt to commit crimes related to self-defence, such as carrying a weapon.

The children of wealth have serious internalising problems as well. In 1999, I reported significant depression in one in five girls. Since then, studies I have conducted show that, on average, serious levels of depression, anxiety, or physical symptoms occur twice as often or more among these boys and girls, compared with national rates.

They display high levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, self-injurious behaviour such as cutting and burning, and rule-breaking behaviours. The bottom line: across geographical areas and public and private schools, upper-middle-class youngsters show alarmingly high rates of serious disturbance.
The high rate of maladjustment among affluent adolescents is strikingly counter-intuitive. There is a tacit assumption - even among those most affected - that education and money procure well-being, and that if children falter, they will swiftly get the appropriate services. Education and money may once have served as buffers against distress, but that is no longer the case. Something fundamental

has changed: the evidence suggests that the privileged young are much more vulnerable today than in previous generations.

The evidence all points to one cause underlying the different disturbances documented: pressure for high-octane achievement. The children of affluent parents expect to excel at school, in multiple extracurricular activities and in their social lives. They feel a relentless sense of pressure that plays out in excessive substance use; as the kids stoutly proclaim, ''We work hard - and we play hard!'' It plays out in crippling anxiety and depression, about anticipated or perceived ''failures''. It plays out in random acts of delinquency - stealing from a friend, shoplifting, defacing property.

It's true, the pressure to do well in school and get into a prestigious university is shared by many teens. But maintaining the mantle of success is a special imperative for the well-off, for whom expectations are especially high. Adolescents of affluence want to meet the standard of living they are used to. What's more, achievement of their extremely lofty goals is tantalisingly within reach, which renders it all the more obligatory. There are few accomplishments that privilege can't bolster, whether it's improved test scores or squash skills, and affluent parents acquire whatever coaching is necessary to achieve the very best. The life credo of these youths becomes, ''I can, therefore, I must.'' Interestingly, affluent youths are not more troubled than others prior to adolescence. The first signs of problems emerge about the age of 13. By this age, 7 per cent of these boys are using marijuana and getting drunk at least once a month. And symptoms of depression and anxiety begin to rise, especially among girls.

Why do problems emerge at this point? Some experimentation with alcohol and drugs is normal for teens.

But moneyed adolescents generally have easier access to substances, money to buy them, good entree to providers, and the best fake IDs.

Then there are peer norms: ''getting wasted'' is often entirely expected at social gatherings. And, of course, there is collusion by some parents, who are all too willing to actively bail out their teens if discovered by authorities. Not surprisingly, high schoolers who anticipate meagre consequences from their parents are among the heaviest substance users.

Year 7 is also a developmental marker for when children begin to think seriously about their long-term life goals. With the capacity for abstract thinking, youths begin identity exploration, grappling with the critical question of ''Who am I?'' In hyper-competitive, upper-middle-class communities, this broad question narrowly morphs into, ''What will I amount to?''

By middle school, these youths come to believe there is one path to ultimate happiness - having money - which in turn requires attending a prestigious university. They grow preoccupied with becoming marketable commodities, pursuing activities chiefly if they will look good on re´sume´s. There is scant time for exploration of who they are as individuals or for nurturing unique interests. There are certain high-pressure traps that white-collar parents, more than others, can fall into.

The first is excessive emphasis on accomplishments. Most parents fervently wish for their children to enjoy the same gratifications that they have been fortunate enough to receive from their own rich educational experiences and professional careers.

Wanting children to do the best they are capable of is certainly appropriate. But too often, what parents want is over the top. My graduate students and I have observed such expectations in action while studying children's perceptions of their parents' values. When children feel that their parents disproportionately value personal successes (in today's grades or tomorrow's careers), far more than they value their personal decency and kindness, the children show elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety.

For children, perceived parental pride in them, and their own self-worth, rests largely - perilously - on achieving and maintaining ''star'' status. The message they hear from parents is not, ''Sweetheart, do the best you're capable of.'' It is, ''You had better score while the [talent] scout's at today's game,'' or ''You've got to ace the test today; you fell behind last semester.'' Such critical messages do not even need words; they can be conveyed by a raised eyebrow or a turned back in response to a judged failure.

The high pressure for achievement is thus experienced as parental criticism. Children come to feel that any failure to accomplish will seriously diminish the acceptance and esteem with which their parents regard them.

The perception of parental criticism is so consistently related to young people's attitudes about themselves that we measure it in every sample we study: ''I am punished for doing things less than perfectly.'' ''My parents never try to understand my mistakes.'' Perceived parental criticism is linked with a variety of adjustment problems: depressive and anxiety symptoms as well as acting-out behaviours.

It's important to note that adult criticism is not annulled by attention or even affection. Parents might think it's OK to keep the pressure on because they eat dinner together and attend all their children's athletic events and performances. But such gestures do not cancel out criticism. Psychologists have firmly established that disparaging words or attitudes have a much stronger impact than words of praise - by at least a factor of three.

Parents, however, are but one part of the equation. It is not family wealth per se but living in the cultural context of affluence that confers risk. Impossibly high expectations are transmitted not only by parents but by the entire community - teachers, schools, coaches, and peers. Athletic coaches can be fiercely invested in a team's star status; as one captain said, ''Our coach tells me all the time that the whole team depends on me to win the championship. Before every game, he tells me that I am the backbone of the entire team and if I don't play well, the team will give up.''

In upper-middle-class settings, kids who have the gumption to defy certain rules achieve high status among their schoolmates. The sport star who can chug down a six-pack after a game, the young man who has made it with many of the hottest girls - they command wide respect in the peer group.

But there are double standards based on gender. Particularly distressing are the double standards about physical appearance: peers place an enormous emphasis on attractiveness among affluent girls. Across the board, the more attractive kids - boys or girls, rich or poor - are more likely to be most popular with their peers. But for girls of high socio-economic status, the onus on being attractive is incredibly high. In our research, we have found that links between peer admiration and beauty were almost twice as strong among affluent girls as compared with affluent boys, and also compared with inner-city girls and boys. The enormous pressures girls face from the peer group are matched by impossibly high demands from adults to succeed in traditionally male domains, such as academics and sports, as well as in the ''feminine'' domains of caring and

kindness. They must not only be highly accomplished but polite and likeable, and they are expected to master the competing demands without visible effort. Daughters of the rich, therefore, strive for effortless perfection - which is not merely challenging to their well-being but ultimately soul-draining.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the girls are more troubled than the boys. They show greater problems across multiple domains. In general, girls and women show their upset in internalising problems, such as depression and anxiety. Affluent girls, however, show serious symptoms also in the most typically male forms, by acting out - rule-breaking, delinquency, and alcohol and drug use. Today's girls are involved in cheating scandals. They have eating disorders. They steal from parents and friends. They are over-represented across all domains of maladjustment. They have it all.

By no means are boys immune; they too face gender-specific challenges as they negotiate the culture of affluence. Rich boys can be disturbingly preoccupied with gaining high power in the peer group, which becomes tied, by late adolescence, to grandstanding via money and sex. Through high school, social dominance is related to good looks, athletics, and the ''cool'' factor of substance use. In college it becomes more about wealth. Moneyed young men (''guys who drop a cool thousand on any given Friday'') are most likely to achieve the ultimate alpha male stamp - being desired by many girls.
Striving ever harder to be at the top puts such boys at risk for limited compassion and kindness.

They can have low capacity for tenderness in close relationships, high capacity for chauvinism and narcissism. In a recent study, we found that narcissistic exhibitionism scores among affluent boys at elite private schools were almost twice the average scores of a more diverse sample.

Why is it that high socio-economic status brings more risk for young people today than it once did? There have been major shifts in aspirations and cultural values towards materialism that can be especially pronounced among the affluent. In 1967, for example, 86 per cent of US first year university students rated ''developing a meaningful philosophy of life'' as an essential life goal. In 2004, only 42 per cent of freshmen agreed with them. Over that time, values such as ''being well-off financially'' and ''attaining prestigious jobs'' rose equivalently in importance. Again, aspiring for status is likely highest among youth in upper-middle-class communities.

Also, the ultimate goal of getting into a good university is decidedly more competitive today than it used to be. Among top-tier universities, the number of applicants has doubled or tripled in the past five years.

Privileged adolescents tend to define being well-off relative to what they see in their own parents. But in today's economy, it is much more difficult to maintain one's parents' standard of living. As one high school student said, ''I want to make what my dad does, so I must get into Wharton. By 30 or 35, I should be making at least a quarter of a million a year.''

One of the most established facts of psychology is that people evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others. Wealth is relative in that we adopt the standards of our immediate contexts, comparing ourselves with those we see doing better than us. The phenomenon of relative deprivation thus becomes a psychological cost of life in the fast lane, surrounded by the extremely successful.

Among youth in high-achieving schools, students are constantly gauging where they stand relative to others in the intense competition for distinction. ''We compare ourselves with each other all the time … '' says a student. ''And we know everyone's top choices of colleges. In my grade, two other athlete-scholars want to go to Duke; we never talk about it openly, but we're constantly weighing our own chances of beating them in getting in.''

Enter envy. My colleagues and I recently found that, compared with inner-city counterparts, students at elite, upper-middle-class schools, especially girls, experienced significantly more envy of peers who they felt surpassed them in popularity, attractiveness, academics and sports.

At the same time, the intense push for super-achievement deprives affluent adolescents of a critical safety valve of life - the deep connectedness of friendship. The very path they take for success inhibits the development of intimacy. The durability, sustainability, and strength of relationships are constantly threatened by competition for highly sought-after goals. How can two people be friends if the self-worth of both depends on being the one chosen for a sought-after goal? One's gain is the other's loss.

Friendships are threatened also by the lack of leisure activities engaged in simply for fun and without a scrutinising adult audience. Children play sport

watched by parents who are often much more invested in team wins than the children are. Individual players' slip-ups are very public, bringing chagrin if not outright shame.

The pursuit of distinction leaves affluent adolescents with days that are heavily scheduled with academic and extracurricular activities. And while my studies show that extensive time in extracurricular activities is not a risk factor in itself - a sense of pressure, criticism, and overly high expectations from adults matter far more - participation restricts socialising to students in the same activities. Further, the constant competition, along with the necessity to display effortless perfection, demands that students show no vulnerabilities. Secrecy about weaknesses inhibits intimacy and further isolates them in their suffering.
Yet another contribution to vulnerability may be an inflated sense of control over one's life. As my colleague Barry Schwartz has shown, affluence leads people to believe they are wholly responsible for their own success. The wealthier people become, the more they believe that they can control many aspects of their life and design exactly the kind of life they want. They come to expect perfection.

Parents' overestimation of what they can actually control is reflected in the illusions harboured by their accomplished children - that one more achievement will push them over the edge to success, acceptance to a top-ranked college. The fallout? Any ''failure'' on any of these fronts can bring a rush of self-blame, shame, and depression.

Why should we care about the problems of rich kids? Any young person who remains in anguish deserves and needs adult intervention. Minimising the problems of rich kids is as ill-founded as accepting death by guns as just what happens to inner-city youth.

Further, today's highly educated youths will disproportionately hold positions of power in the next generation. Their values will disproportionately shape norms in education, politics, and business.

The distress and substance use children are experiencing can have considerable long-term costs. At a personal level, depressive episodes during adolescence bring elevated risk for recurrent episodes later in life.

Prolonged feelings of stress can affect not just psychological well-being but also physical health and productivity at work.

At a societal level, people who are unhappy, with a fragile sense of self, can be more acquisitive than philanthropic, more focused on gaining more for themselves than on improving the lot of others.

The high levels of substance use can affect the developing brain, impair coping ability, and impede everyday functioning. If students must have Adderall to maintain their high marks, how will they manage when they have real jobs in high-pressure settings?

Putting a brake on the development of symptoms among ambitious youth is not easy; it will require changes at multiple levels, from systems of secondary and higher education to individual families. The relentless pursuit of star status can powerfully thwart the well-being of students.

Parents must play a central role in mitigating pressures on children, helping them to remain grounded in a value system that emphasises decency and kindness as much as getting ahead. Ponder the price of prestige, power and privilege.

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