

Generation next or stressed generation?

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High parental expectations and pressure to excel and achieve perfection in various aspects of life have left children under 17 more stressed compared to their previous generations, according to Sabine Rizk-Skaf, a clinical psychologist at the Human Relations Institute.

"Children today, especially here in the UAE, are put into a competitive environment where they have to struggle to excel. They are given more extra-curricular activities and are set in multi-cultural groups. Personally, I have come across mothers and even my own friends who say that their children have four to five activities per week. How can they focus if they are given too many things to concentrate on? There's no more room for enjoyment or creativity. It has become a world of perfection," she said.

Suhail Hussain, for example, has a packed schedule that leaves him worn out every day. The 15-year-old student juggles classes, the school club, football practice, homework and music lessons. And despite all these, he tries to cram time to spend with his friends during weekends.

"I'm so tired by the end of the day that I fall asleep the second I lie on my bed. I'm so busy that I don't even get to see my younger brother at home and I get headaches from time to time. I can't drop any classes because I need all these extra activities to add to my final grade. Another reason I can't drop them is because my parents will mentally attack me by telling me that I'm a failure and compare me to her friends' children," he said.

Suhail's father, however, said he believes that keeping his son busy with activities will improve his ability to multi-task.

"It may seem a lot because when you are an adult and are married with children, you'll know how to balance work and home life. I feel that

this is best for my son's future," he said.

Sabine said this brings in the concern of disoriented or 'broken' families where children hardly receive support, motivation or advice when it comes to dealing with certain situations.

"There is a lack of connectivity and poor support system between families. Parents are not involved in spending quality time with their

children and they do not have relatives to depend on to take care of their children. Thus, children are the ones who end up suffering," she said.

External factors such as financial problems have an effect on children's mental well-being and Sabine says it is because schools are so expensive nowadays and families tend to burden their children by involving them in financial issues. Another issue mounting on pressure out of the academic environment is the need to feel accepted by peers.

"There's a cultural aspect here in the UAE so cliques are created. There are many cases of bullying in schools in the UAE as well and there's a constant pressure to look good or have the latest things to feel accepted," she said.

This is what 14-year-old student in Sharjah, Savariya Shetty, agreed to as she said she takes pride in her grades but has no confidence when it comes to making friends or being accepted in a group.

"Most of my old friends have met new people in their school and have been together with them since then. They're like a pack now. I don't know how to approach them or talk to them. I've got a few friends in my class but I want to be friends with them, too. I keep worrying because they might not like me or I might not be able to talk about the things they talk about. I can't tell my parents about this because they're only going to tell me to keep my mind busy with studies and to forget about them because they're not in my school. It's depressing me and I feel stressed out because of it," she said.

Similarly, Rahim Mahtab, a student at Cambridge International School said that studying in a coeducation school brings its own share of concerns.

"Apart from school and subjects, studying in a coeducation school brings a lot of stress because you have to look after your personality. There are a lot of multicultural groups in the school and you have to be aware of your actions so you don't offend anyone," he said.

According to Sabine, more disorders among children have been identified through clinical research in the past 20 to 30 years and some of the things that trouble children are attention disorders, peer pressure and performance anxiety. While it is a blaming battle between parents and teachers, Sabine said that both, including faculty in schools should work together to assess problems and solve it.

"From my experience, I've come across cases of self-harm, where children are severely depressed. People should understand that children and adolescents are more prone to depression compared to adults. Unfortunately there are many teachers who fail to identify these problems among students so it goes from bad to worse. The school setting here gives room to more pressure and there is lack of support by teachers. There are very few schools in the UAE that have in-house counsellors and from what I've seen, very few of these counsellors are present on a daily basis. They should know how to spot someone stressed academically. There are instances where parents are called to attend sessions but they don't show up. Then the parents blame the teachers and the schools while the schools blame the parents. We should work together and ensure there are multiple intervention to solve these problems," she said.