

# Youth in High Achieving Schools: Maximizing Resilience

Suniya Luthar, Ph.D.



## Authentic Connections

A nonprofit group committed to maximizing individuals' personal well-being & resilience in their communities, schools, and work settings

## Programmatic Research on High Achieving Schools:

Origins in Connecticut in the 1990s at Yale University, subsequently in New York at Columbia University's Teachers College, expanded across the country

Continued peer-reviewed, scientific research publications

- in public & independent, day and boarding schools
- work developed in close collaborations with school administrators, parents, and students
- aimed at pinpointing and implementing concrete directions for interventions

Grounded in personal insights: Twenty years as a mother in a HAS community



# Questions addressed

- How do we define High Achieving Schools (HAS)?
- What evidence do we have that HAS students are troubled?
- Why do HAS students show problems?
- When do adjustment difficulties in students begin to emerge?
- What can we do to minimize pressures and maximize well-being?

# Defining High Achieving Schools

- High Achieving Schools (HAS) are those with high standardized test scores, rich extracurricular and academic offerings, and graduates heading to some of the most selective colleges.
- These schools emphasize the importance of community and relationships in fostering growth of the “whole child”, helping students grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally, while strengthening character and civic engagement.

- Foster intellectual growth, curiosity, and creativity
- Promote positive social-emotional development
- Emphasize the importance of character, service, and global citizenship
- Proactively shape the next generation of leaders

“Think Expansively, Act Ethically, Lead Responsibly”

# What is the evidence that HAS students are troubled?

Across multiple studies, these have shown with levels of distress higher than national norms

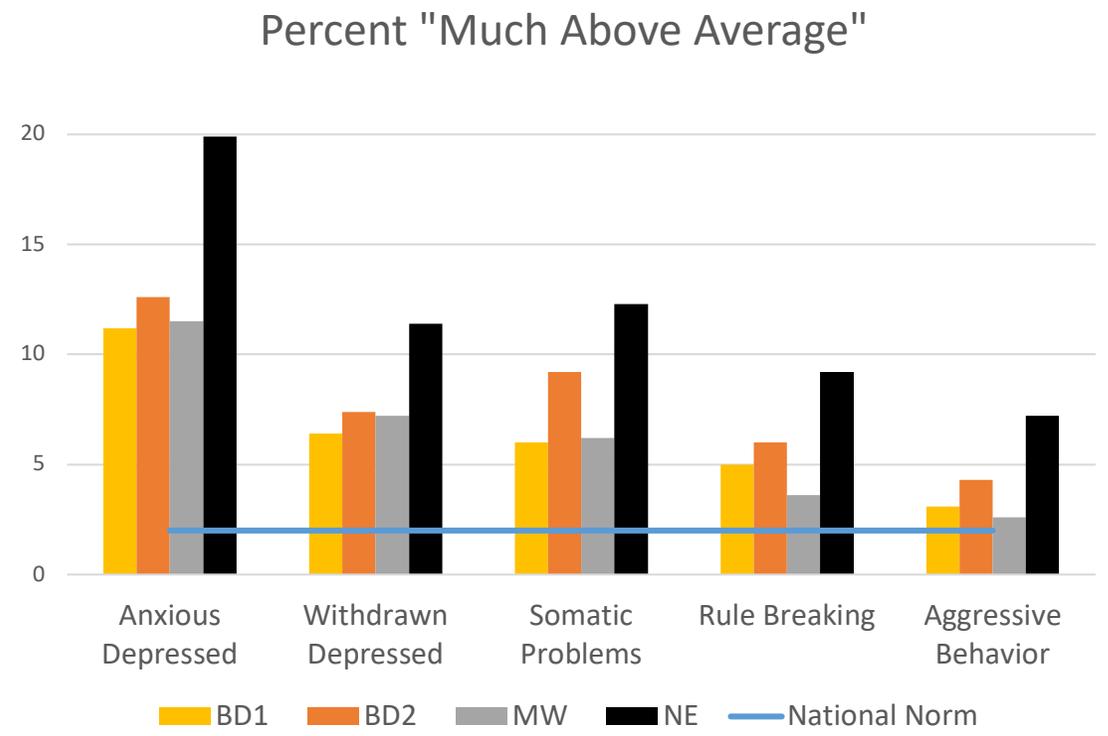
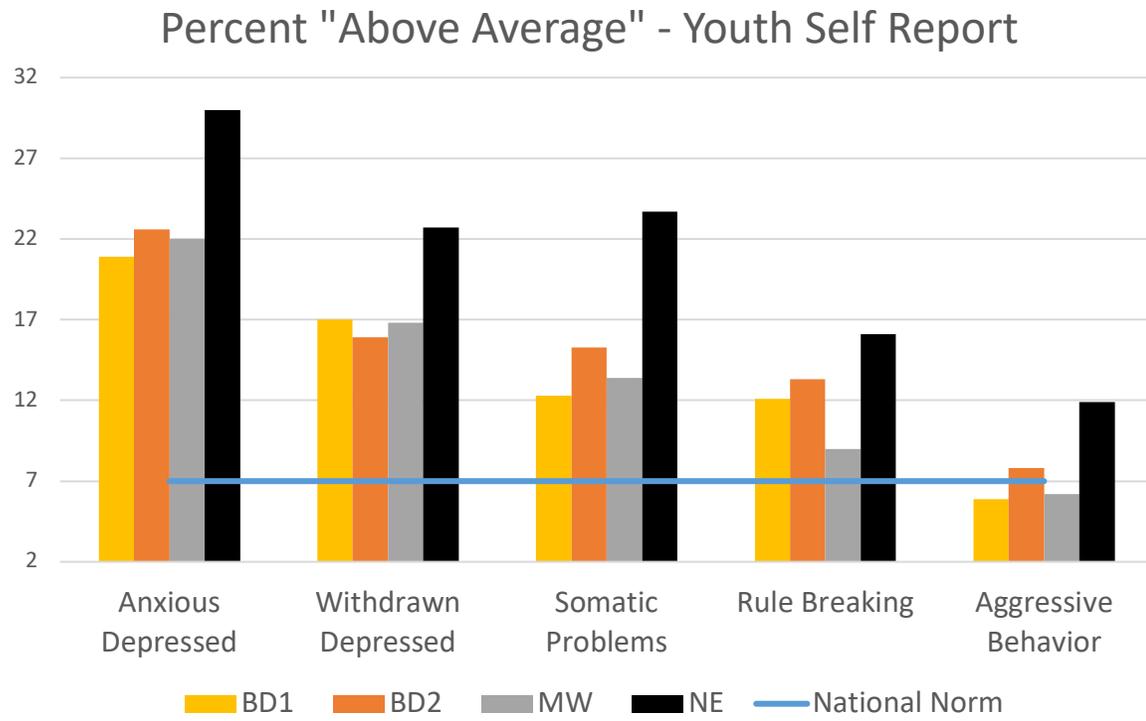
- statistically more likely than other US youth to show emotional or behavioral difficulties such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse
- In 2009, labeled a “newly identified at-risk group” (Koplowicz et al., 2009; *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology*)
- Domains of high distress can vary by community, public/ independent schools
  - Northeast public school: Substance use, serious rule-breaking
  - Northwest public school: Significant self-injury, depression/ anxiety, family problems
  - Midwest independent school: Low substance use, high depression...

Luthar & Becker (2002). Privileged but pressured. *Child Development*.

Luthar (2003). The culture of affluence. *Child Development*.

Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman (2013). “I cam, therefore I must”. *Development & Psychopathology*

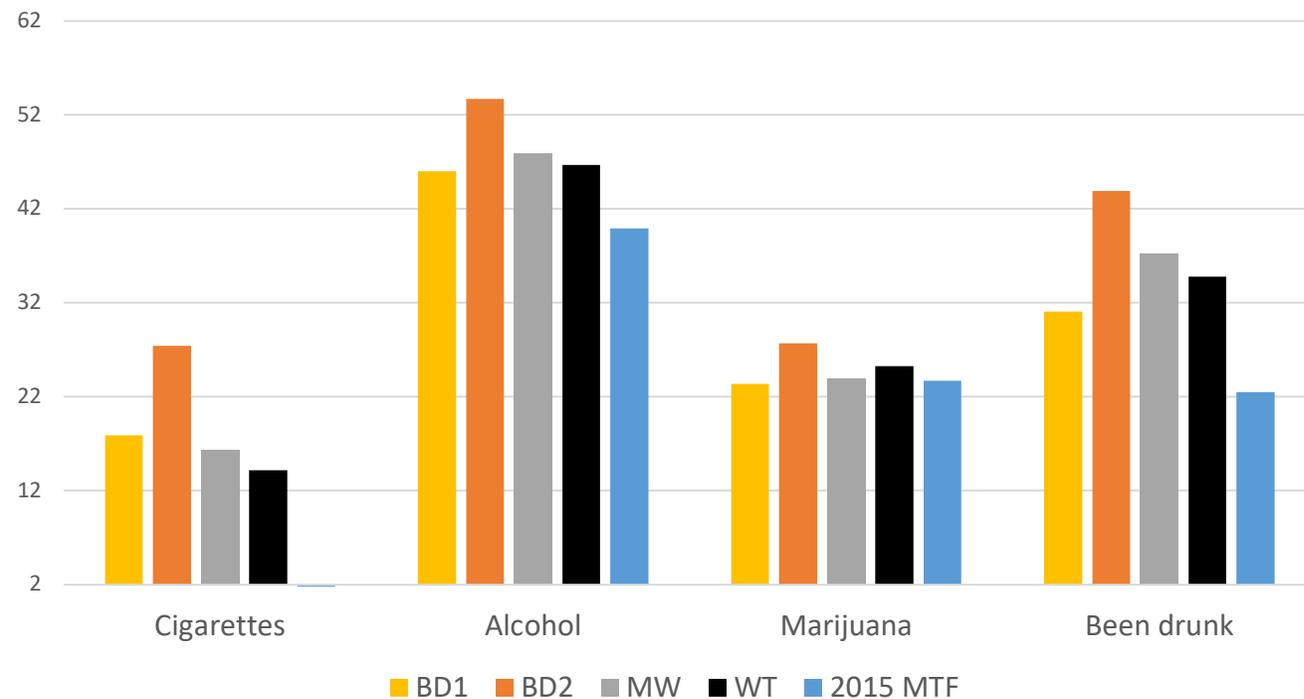
# HAS students more likely that norms to show clinically significant levels of adjustment problems



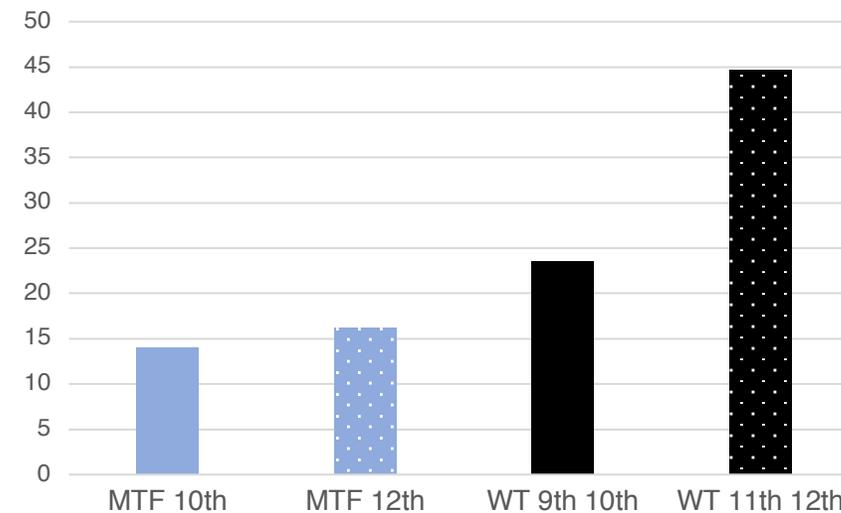
2017-2018 school assessments: NE suburban public school vs. 2 NE boarding schools; MW independent school; national norms.

# HAS students abuse substances at rates higher than national norms

Substance Use: % last year vs. Similar Schools



% used E-cig/JUUL last month vs. MTF 2015

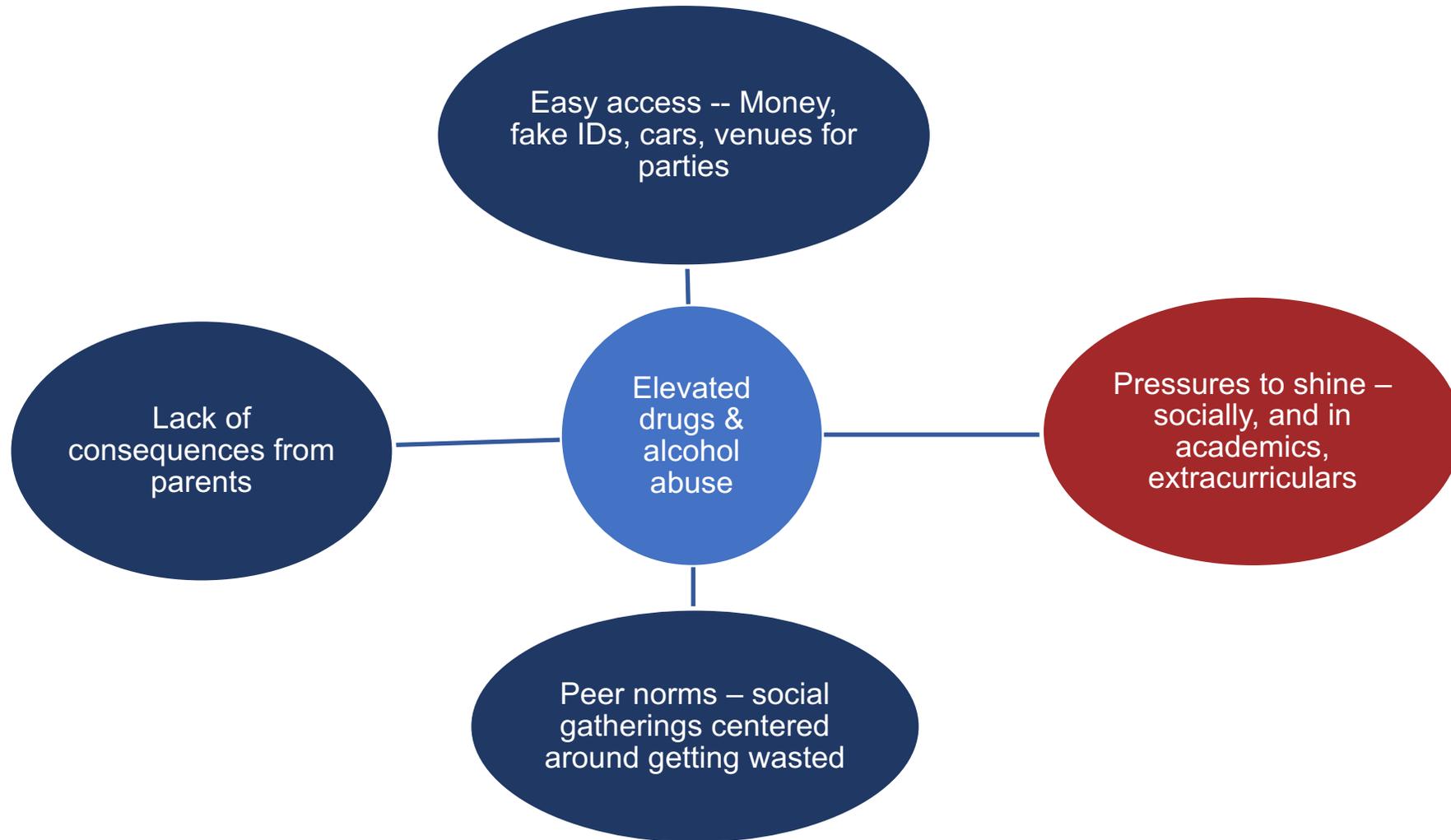


## Maturing out of substance use in adulthood?

- No signs by age 27 years: Continued high rates of use
- Elevations in lifetime diagnoses of alcohol / drug dependence; twice as high as in national norms

Luthar, Small, & Ciciolla, (2017), *Development and Psychopathology*

# Why are HAS students' substances at rates much higher than national norms?



# Pressures to succeed come from several sources

## Family:

- Parents want their children to have advantages they themselves had

## Peers:

- High value placed on status; constant comparisons with others

## Schools:

- Seek to have students distinguished at the levels of state, county, & country

## The American Dream: “More is better”

- Material rewards make for ultimate happiness
- Acquired through competitive schools and colleges



Pressures to shine...socially, and in academics, extracurricular activities

Luthar & Kumar (In press). *Handbook of Handbook of School-Based Mental Health Promotion: An Evidence-Informed Framework*.

## Challenges unique to HAS students:

Drive to distinguish themselves... among other highly accomplished peers

More than youth in general, these youth prioritize

- Maintaining mantle of success – meeting their parents' standard of living
- Achieving lofty goals that are tantalizingly within reach

Students come to believe that there are few achievements that privilege can't help them acquire

Upper middle class parents anxiously acquire “needed” coaching

**The life credo of these youth becomes, “I can, therefore, I must.”**

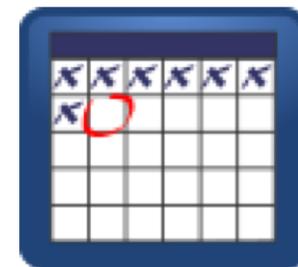
### Common statements from HAS students:

*“I can get the best SAT tutoring so I must get my scores to 2300.”*

*“I can take five AP courses, so of course, I will.”*

## Note: “Over-involvement” in extracurriculars is not a salient source of pressure

- In multiple studies, number of hours in activities are unrelated to distress indices
- More significant is perceptions of adults as being critical, distant
- Beyond parents’ criticism, several culture-specific processes: Parents plus peers, schools, communities



## PARENTS: CULTURE-SPECIFIC FACTORS

HAS Surveys assess dimensions salient in the context of affluence, e.g., **Containment**, or anticipated repercussions from parents for errant behaviors

Parents differ in how seriously they react when they discover types of rule-breaking behaviors among their teenage children. Reactions can range from simply talking about the incident or giving warnings for the future, to revoking privileges that are very important to the person. For each of the following items, please indicate how serious the consequences from your parents would be, if they found out you'd done the behavior in question (sample items)

**Rudeness:** Were rude to an adult relative (e.g., an aunt)?

**Bullying:** Ridiculed another student in front of many others?

**Delinquency:** Stole another student's belongings (e.g., a jacket)?

**Cheating:** Plagiarized paragraphs from the internet for a term paper ?

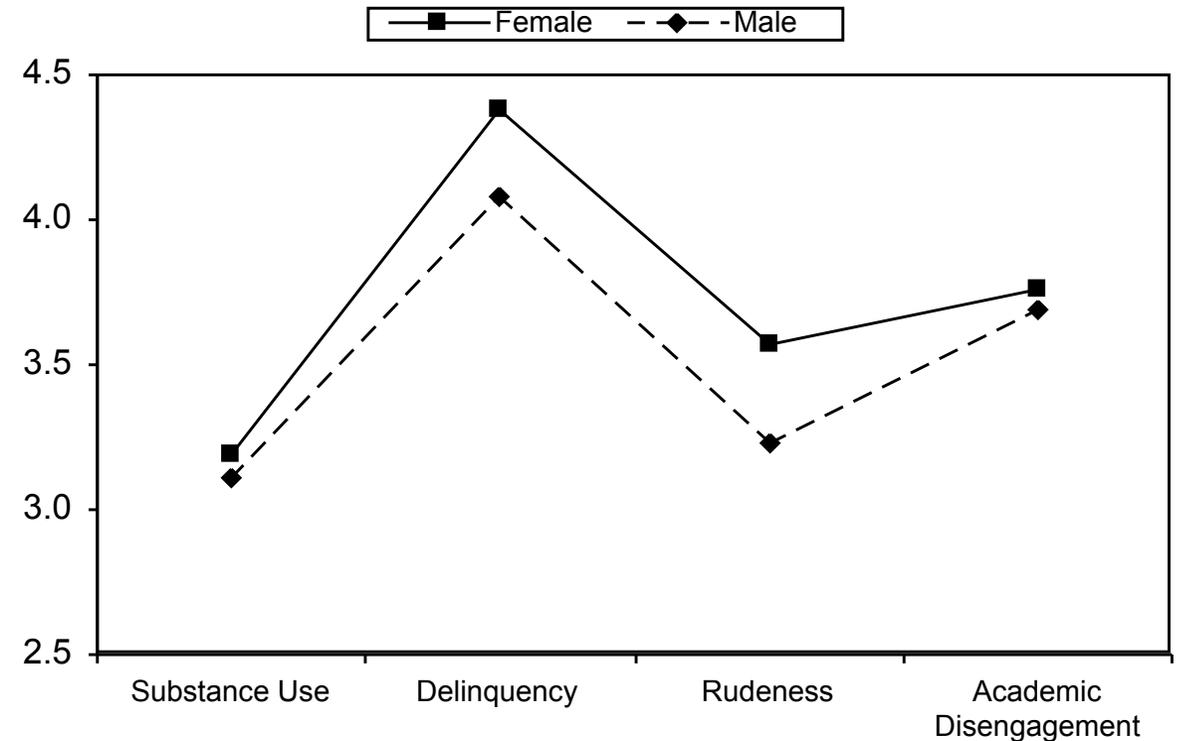
**Academic indolence:** Played truant from school on the day of an important exam?

**Drugs:** Got drunk?

Luthar & Goldstein (2009), *Development & Psychopathology*

## Parents' containment, or anticipated repercussions for errant behaviors

- Students expect significantly lower repercussions, from parents, for detected substance use than for delinquency or academic indolence
- Perceived containment is a robust predictor of students' frequency of substance use
- Girls higher on all dimensions of parent containment



Luthar & Goldstein (2009), *Development & Psychopathology*

## PARENTS: CULTURE-SPECIFIC FACTORS

HAS students' perceptions of parents' values:  
Perceived overemphasis on achievements, relative to decency

Rank order the top three of the following six items based on what you believe your parents value the most for you: That you ...

- excel academically,
- attend a good college,
- have a successful career in the future
  
- are respectful to others
- try to help others in need
- are kind to others.

Luthar & Becker (2002), *Child Development*  
Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2016, *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*

# Perceived parents' overemphasis on achievements is linked to children's adjustment problems

- Associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance use
- Does not benefit GPA
- In fact can be linked with lower grades and poorer teacher ratings
  - It is particularly problematic when both parents are seen as high on achievement emphasis
- Best adjustment outcomes are seen when both parents are seen as low, or neutral, on achievement emphasis
- In the subculture of high achievement pressure, can be highly beneficial for parents to provide a buffer, with balanced values

Luthar & Becker (2002), *Child Development*

Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar (2016), *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*

# Peer Influences: HAS culture-specific issues

## Gender-specific concerns: Girls

- Peer group
  - Enormous emphasis on physical attractiveness
  - Double standards around drinking, sex
  - Substance use linked with “liked most” and with “liked least”
- Envy of ‘friends’ seen as doing better than self
  - Higher than among affluent boys, & inner-city girls & boys
  - True across domains: Envy of Looks, Popularity, Academics

## Gender-specific concerns: Boys

### Substance use

- Robust links with peer popularity (“liked most”)
- Preoccupation with status, in turn tied to money, sex
- Jockeying to be a “baller”  
“status earned by possession of “game”
- Potential risks for
  - Chauvinism and narcissism?
  - Dishonesty (white collar crime)?
  - Low intimacy?

Both genders: Strong effects of **comparisons with others** on social media

# School climate: Comprehensive assessments in HAS Survey

Within a particular school, which dimensions are

- most strongly linked with outcomes;
- focusing on those processes that are modifiable; and
- identifying the top 2-3 that should be prioritized in interventions?

SCHOOL	
School Emotional Engagement	I care about the school I go to
Confiding in adults (help-seeking)	If you felt troubled about a personal or family problem, how likely is it that you 'd confide in an adult at school.
Respectful School Climate	When students break rules, they are treated fairly.
Caring Adult/Teacher	At school, there is a teacher or some other adult who will miss me when I'm absent.
Parent & Community Involvement	Adults in my community know what goes on inside schools.
School Leadership	In my school, students are given a chance to help make decisions.
Peer Climate & Bullying	When students see another student being picked on, they try to stop it.
School Diversity	My teachers call on students of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds.
Teacher Academic Support	My teachers help me catch up if I am behind.
Alienation from Teachers	(S)he has ignored me or made me feel excluded
Adults' Achievement Expectations	These adults would be disappointed in me if... I did not get into a prestigious college or university
Sleep	On a regular school night, at what time do you usually go to sleep?
AP/IB courses	How many college level courses (AP / IB) are you taking during your junior year of high school?
Extracurricular Time Use	How many hours per week, on average, have you spent participating in each type of activity?

## Illustrative findings:

### Correlations between students' ratings on school climate & adjustment outcomes

- School Emotional Engagement
- Confiding in adults / help-seeking
- School limit-setting (containment)
- Respect for students / fairness
- Caring Adult/Teacher
- Parent & Community Involvement
- School Leadership opportunities
- Peer Climate & Bullying
- Respect for Diversity
- Teacher Academic Support
- Alienation from Teachers
- Adults' Achievement Expectations
- Sleep
- AP/IB courses
- Homework
- Extracurricular Time Use
- Stress from academics
- Stress from time pressures

**Illustration:**

Correlations	Internalizing	Externalizing	Substance	Empathy	Prosocial	Intrinsic
Emo Engagement	-.45**	-.35**	-.15**	.10*	.21**	.16**
Teach Alienation	.32**	.40**	.19**	-.04	-.13	-.01
Respectful/Fair	-.26**	-.31**	-.18**	.11*	.12**	.12**
Caring Adult	-.33**	-.30**	-.07	.12**	.20**	.16**
Intol Bullying	-.40**	-.36**	-.07	.04	.16**	.05
Respect Diversity	-.14**	-.20**	-.09*	.15**	.12**	.18**
Par-Comm Involve	-.36**	-.30**	-.07	.10*	.11**	.18**
School Leadership	-.34**	-.35**	-.20**	.06	.10	.08
Academic Support	-.29**	-.27**	-.10*	.05	.12**	.01

Almost all are significantly correlated with outcomes

- Question: Which ones have the most unique importance?

## Illustrative findings:

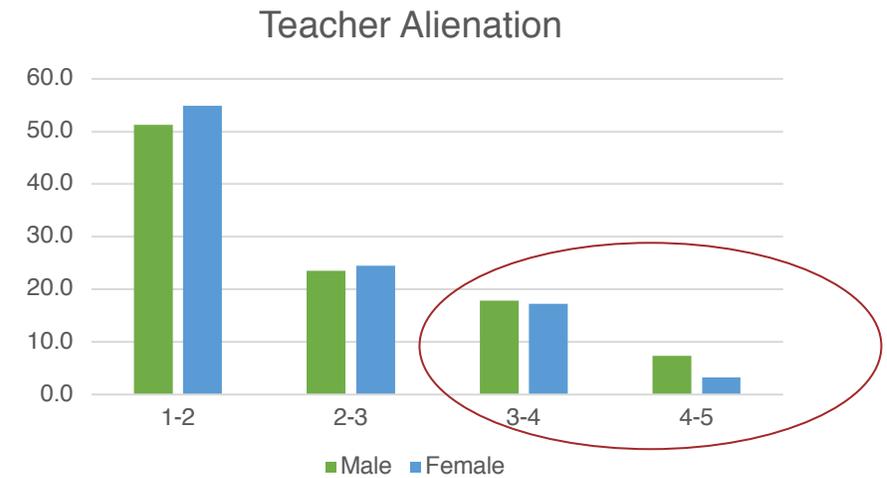
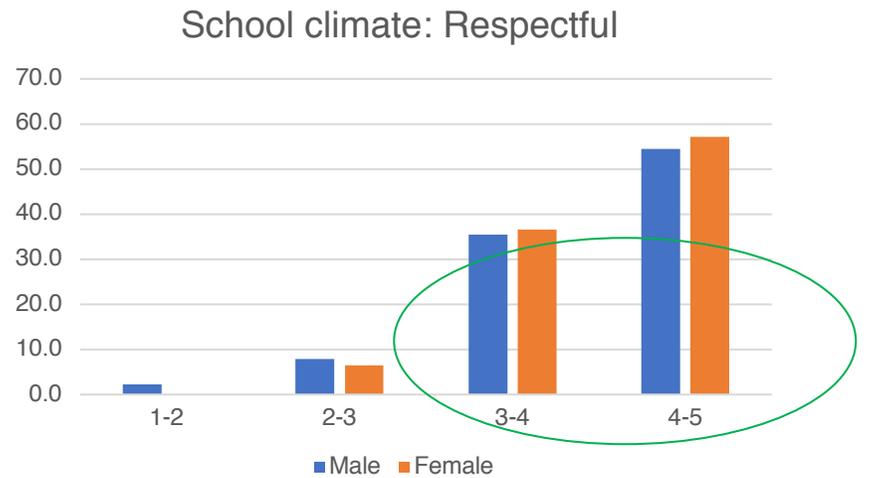
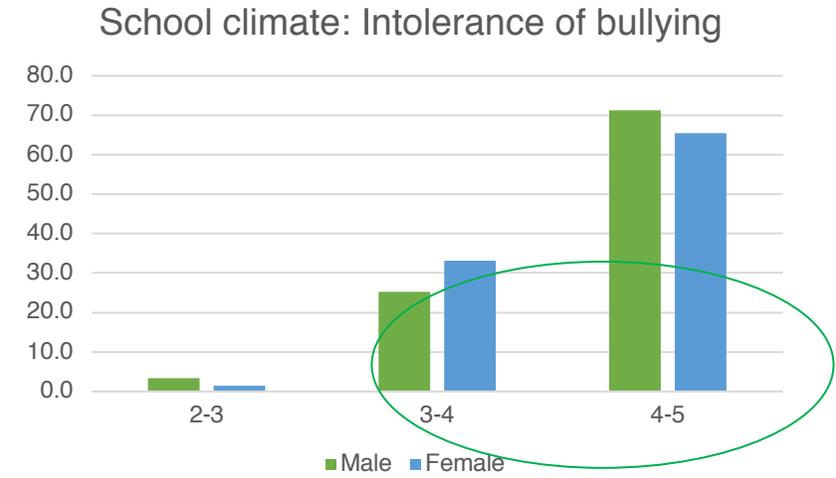
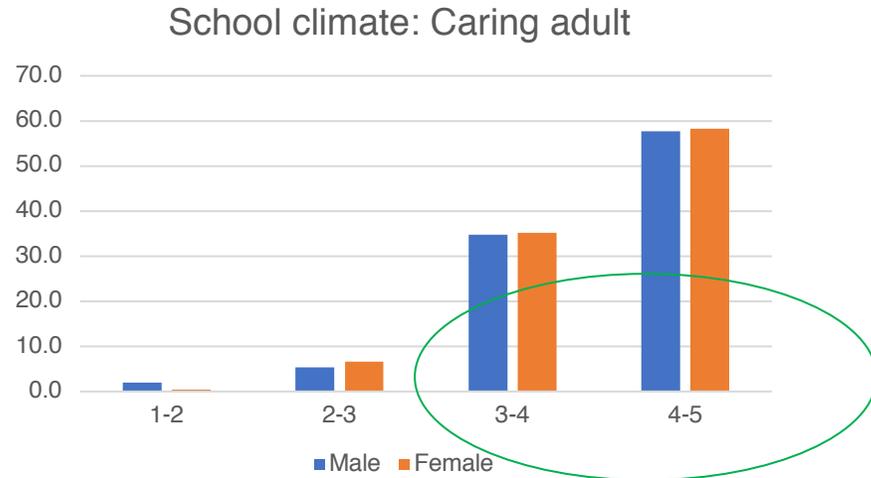
### Multivariate regression analyses, links for "potent" climate dimensions in this school

- School Emotional Engagement
- Confiding in adults / help-seeking
- School limit-setting (containment)
- Respect for students / fairness
- Caring Adult/Teacher**
- Parent-Community Involvement**
- School Leadership opportunities
- Peer Climate & Bullying**
- Respect for Diversity
- Teacher Academic Support
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- Adults' Achievement Expectations
- Sleep
- AP/IB courses
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- Stress from academics
- Stress from time pressures

Illustration:						
Regressions	Internalizing	Externalizing	Substance	Empathy	Prosocial	Intrinsic
Emo Engagement	-.44**	-.32**	-.12*	.20**	.27**	.23**
Teach Alienation	.29**	.38**	.29**	-.13**	-.14**	-.10*
Respectful/Fair	-.29**	-.39**	-.26**	.16**	.26**	.15**
Caring Adult	-.30**	-.33**	-.25**	.21**	.27**	.17**
Intol Bullying	-.37**	-.35**	-.20**	.17**	.24**	.09
Respect Diversity	-.15**	-.19**	-.13**	.25**	.22**	.23**
Par-Comm Involve	-.35**	-.30**	-.15**	.22**	.21**	.17**
School Leadership	-.25**	-.29**	-.21**	.13**	.12**	.15**
Academic Support	-.31**	-.26**	-.15**	.18**	.20**	.13**

**Consistent, links across different outcomes indicate top priorities for interventions in this particular school**

# In this school, which areas could most benefit from attention? Students' ratings on school climate dimensions (percentages)



## Distinctive features of HAS survey

### Students' adjustment

- YSR (copyrighted) yields in-depth measurement of internalizing & externalizing symptoms, rates compared against other HAS students and against national norms
- Provides in-depth assessment of problems to which HAS students are vulnerable: Anxious-Depressed, Withdrawn-depressed, Somatic (10-12 items each)
- Others (e.g. YBSSR) include single items for these critical adjustment domains, plus those not as relevant for HAS students (e.g., physical fights)

### Reliability of data obtained

- HAS provides specific alpha coefficients -- reliability of students' reports -- for each measure separately (vs. students' self-reports of "how honestly they answered")
- HAS measures used have been through rigorous peer-review in scientific publications

### Socializing influences

- Careful attention to culture-specific influences, that can have strong effects (e.g., containment, perfectionism, envy, and achievement pressures)

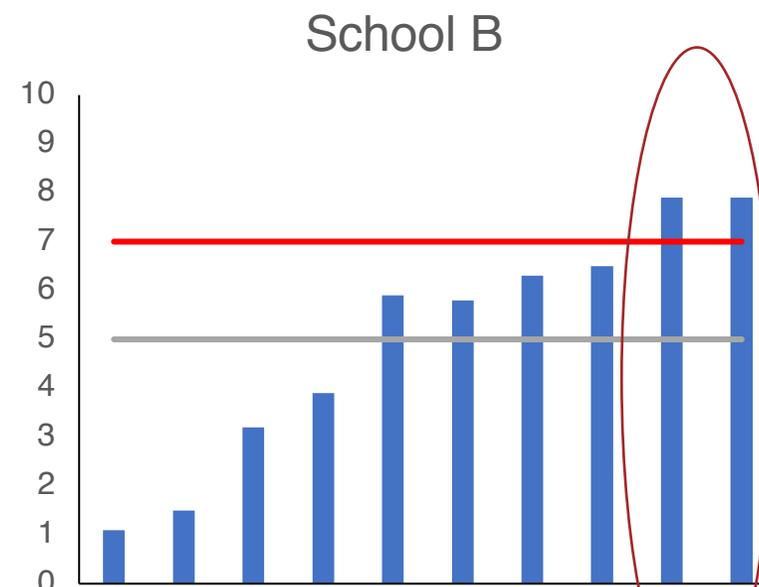
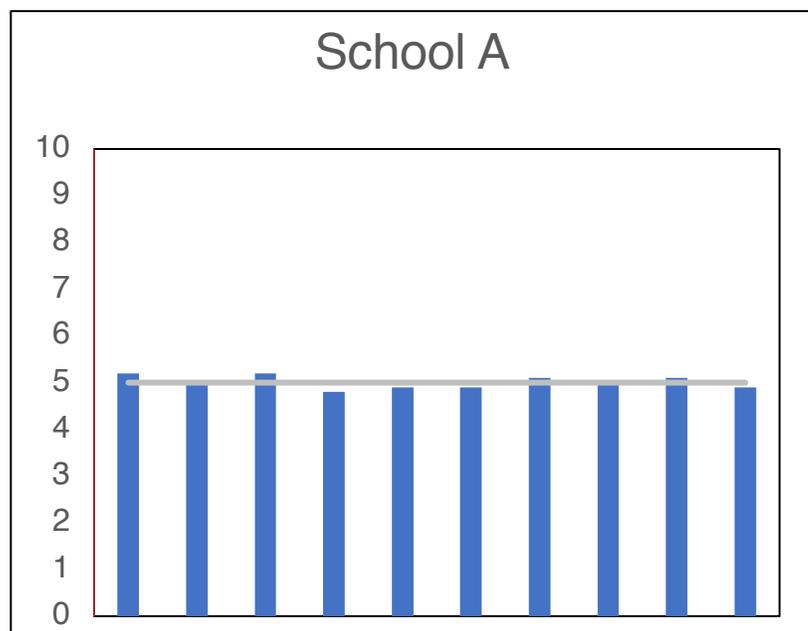
### Intervention directions

- Recommendations are evidence-based, using methods and measures from scientific peer reviewed work

## Measurement of HAS student's adjustment

Importance of using the Youth Self-Report:

Reveals the proportion of students who have clinically significant scores on different types of symptoms

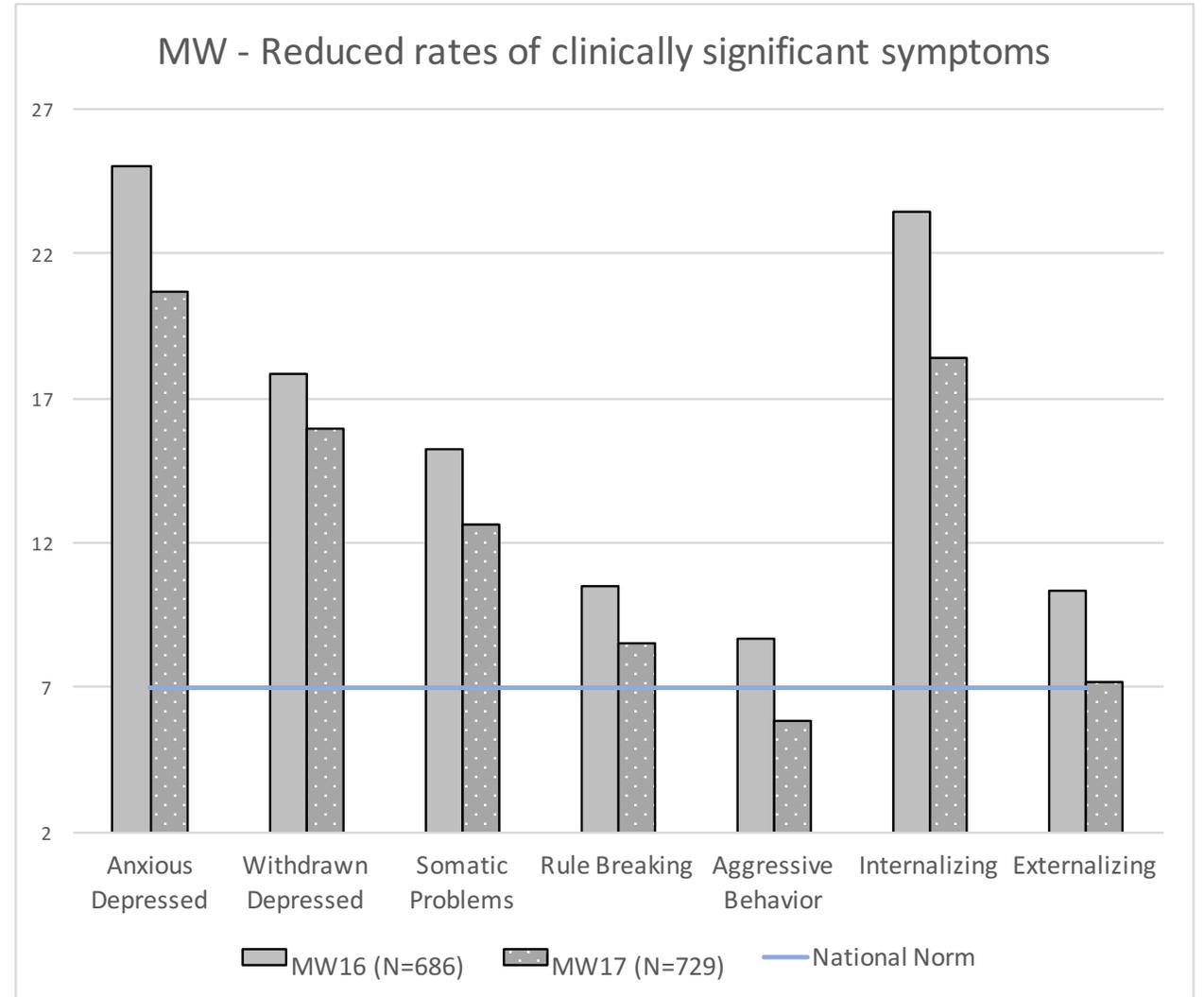


In both schools, students have an average Anxious-depressed score of 5. Only the YSR shows what proportion have clinically significant scores, compared to norms, on symptoms... two of ten in this example

# Does using this HAS, data-based approach make a difference?

## Evidence of change

- Midwest independent day school, BR, was surveyed in 2016
- Presented findings to all faculty and to parents
- Discussions with school administrators, counselors, and students to pinpoint top three intervention directions
- Following year (2017) BR school reassessed; decreases in all symptom areas.



# What **should not** be emphasized in interventions within HAS contexts:

- **“Just do more”** – this can be highly counterproductive; students constantly hear the relentless message to try harder

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology  
2017, Vol. 113, No. 3, 492–511

© 2016 American Psychological Association  
0022-3514/17/\$12.00 http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000102

## Much Ado About Grit: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Grit Literature

Marcus Credé and Michael C. Tynan  
Iowa State University

Peter D. Harms  
University of Alabama

Grit has been presented as a higher order performance and distinct from other traits. This review of the grit literature with a particular focus on performance, retention, conscientiousness, and performance, retention, conscientiousness based on 584 effect sizes from 88 independent studies. The higher order structure of grit is not confirmed, and that grit is very strongly correlated with perseverance of effort and retention, and that perseverance of effort explains significant variance in performance above and beyond conscientiousness. In aggregate our results suggest that grit has weak effects on performance and retention, and that the primary utility of the grit construct is in identifying individuals who are likely to persevere.

*Keywords:* grit, performance, meta-analysis

## To What Extent and Under Which Circumstances Are Growth Mind-Sets Important to Academic Achievement? Two Meta-Analyses

Victoria F. Sisk<sup>1</sup>, Alexander P. Burgoyne<sup>2</sup>, Jingze Sun<sup>1</sup>, Jennifer L. Rutledge, and Brooke N. Macnamara<sup>1</sup>, and

Psychological Science  
1–23  
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*Development and Psychopathology* 25 (2013), 1529–1549  
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doi:10.1017/S0954579413000758

## “I can, therefore I must”: Fragility in the upper-middle classes

SUNIYA S. LUTHAR, SAMUEL H. BARKIN, AND ELIZABETH J. CROSSMAN  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

**Abstract**  
We review evidence on a group recently identified as “at risk,” that is, youth in upwardly mobile, upper-middle class community contexts. These youngsters are statistically more likely than normative samples to show serious disturbance across several domains including drug and alcohol use, as well as internalizing and externalizing problems. Extant data on these problems are reviewed with attention to gender-specific patterns, presenting quantitative developmental research findings along with relevant evidence across other disciplines. In considering possible reasons for elevated maladjustment, we appraise multiple pathways, including aspects of family dynamics, peer norms, pressures at schools, and policies in higher education. All of these pathways are considered within the context of broad, exosystemic issues: the pervasive emphasis, in contemporary American culture, on maximizing personal status, and how this can threaten the well-being of individuals and of communities. We then discuss issues that warrant attention in future research. The paper concludes with suggestions for interventions at multiple levels, targeting youth, parents, educators, as well as policymakers, toward reducing pressures and maximizing positive adaptation among “privileged but pressured” youth and their families.

nature of human attributes (e.g., intelligence). The theory that human attributes are malleable with effort (e.g., intelligence) enjoy many positive benefits. Students who have *fixed* mind-sets experience negative consequences. Students who have *growth* mind-sets experience positive consequences. To increase students’ growth mind-sets—thereby increasing their academic achievement—schools around the world. In our first meta-analysis ( $k = 43$ ,  $N = 57,155$ ), we examined the effectiveness of mind-set interventions. Overall effects were weak for both meta-analyses, supporting the theory, namely, that students with low socioeconomic status benefit most from mind-set interventions.

ent, open data

# What should be prioritized in interventions: Tending the caregivers



"Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships," says Suniya Luthar, PhD, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University who has studied vulnerability and resilience for more than three decades.

This year, she and her colleague Nancy Eisenberg, PhD, published a special section in the journal *Child Development* to highlight evidence-based interventions demonstrated to maximize resilience in families and children.. Among those articles addressing diverse vulnerable populations, many highlight programs that support parents. "If you want a child to be functioning well, tend to the person who's tending the child," Luthar says.

- APA Monitor, September 2017

Being a “good enough parent” or “good enough teacher” is hard work, especially as first-responders of highly stressed children

The New York Times Magazine Share 107

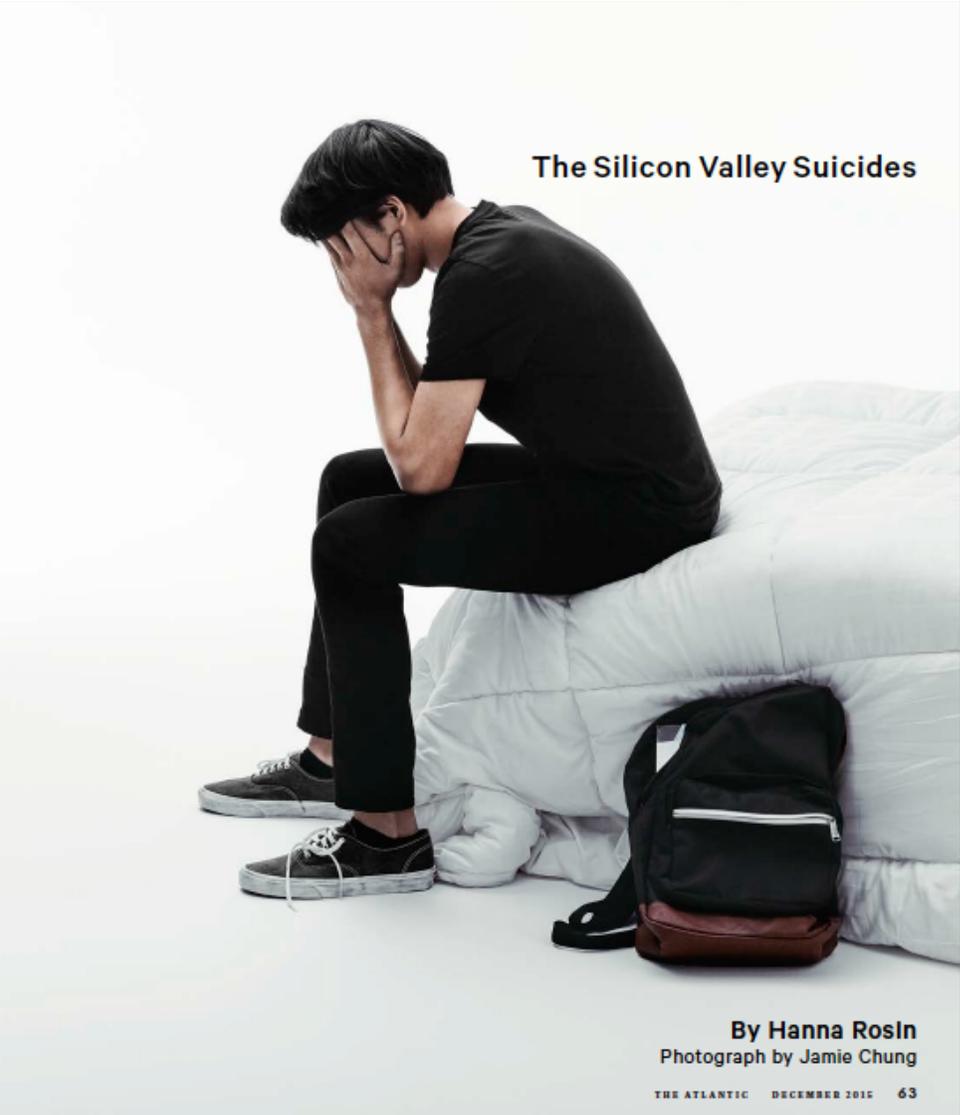
## Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?

Parents, therapists and schools are struggling to figure out whether helping anxious teenagers means protecting them or pushing them to face their fears.

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS OCT. 11, 2017



## The Silicon Valley Suicides

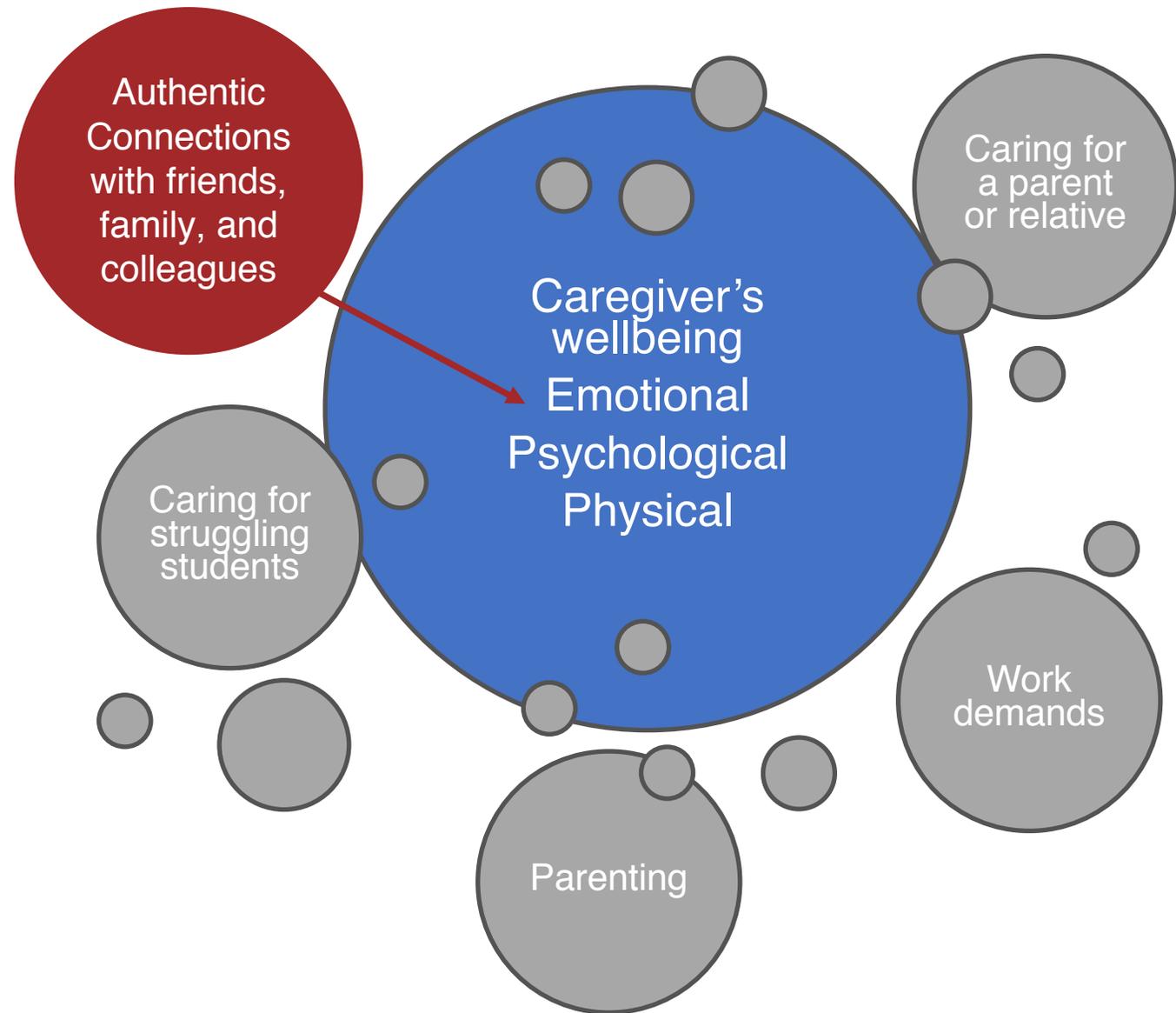


By Hanna Rosin  
Photograph by Jamie Chung

THE ATLANTIC DECEMBER 2015 63

To foster resilience in children,  
we must ensure well-being of  
their primary caregivers

- This is best done through ongoing support for them in their daily lives (Luthar & Eisenberg, 2017)



## Authentic Connections Groups for Physician mothers at Mayo Clinic, AZ

- Physicians are at high risk for burnout, women, mothers, still more
- Weekly sessions for 3 months, freed time by Mayo administration
- Zero dropouts, significant gains vs. controls across outcomes including cortisol (Luthar et al. (2017), *Women's Health Issues*).

"My thanks and congratulations on this seminal work. So great. Tremendous contribution to the literature and to our profession/Mayo staff. Well done."

- John Noseworthy, MD  
CEO, Mayo Clinic, USA June 10, 2017



[Bit.ly/acgjoin](https://bit.ly/acgjoin)

# Additional AC Groups successfully conducted

- Current ongoing groups:
  - Mayo AZ (eight groups, more planned in AZ and MN)
  - Groups for clinicians (psychologists, social workers, nurses) in the community
  - High Achieving School advisors, counselors, teachers who tend highly stressed students (and many parents themselves)

*"[AC Groups] helped me connect with colleagues in a way I have not carved out for myself previously. It is a warm, inviting, safe space and I can feel my blood pressure drop even when I start the walk towards the meeting place."*

- A participant in AC Groups for HAS staff

*"This kind of intervention holds the potential for retaining faculty who we may lose to burnout and creating a more connected and supportive community that will in turn increase the level of health and wellness in the community."*

- An Administrator who brought ACG to the school

# Evidence-Based Recommendations for Parents

## Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships

- “I feel seen & loved for the person I am, at my core”
- This is true for children – and for those who tend them

- **Parents must foster their own wellbeing:** being a “enough parent” is difficult work
- **Good, open communication... starting in early childhood**
  - “I tell my mother about my problems and troubles”
- **Avoid what may be seen as criticism –**
  - “I never feel like I can meet my mother’s expectations”
- **Be vigilant for distress among youth**
  - Check in frequently, sincerely – even when brushed of
- **Appropriate, consistent limit-setting:** Anticipated repercussions for
  - Substance use, rudeness, bullying, rule-breaking, cheating
  - Linked with low substance use and high prosocial behaviors
- **Be a good role model**
  - Family values on kindness, decency, integrity
  - Particularly important in hyper-competitive subculture

*“We must use our science to benefit the children and families we study”*

- Edward Zigler, Yale University

## High Achieving Schools Survey

*Luthar is the country’s leading expert on resilience in adolescents, and her work in high-achieving schools is in a league of its own. This is a top-notch scientist and also a skilled, experienced clinical psychologist and educator, who has a deep understanding of issues unique to high-pressure school contexts. Based on her surveys, Luthar conveys — with both compassion and precision — the specific areas that particular communities must prioritize in maximizing well-being of their young.*

- **Rachel Simmons,**

Co-founder of Girls Leadership,  
Bestselling Author of *Odd Girl Out*, *The Curse of the Good Girl* and *Enough As She Is*

## Authentic Connections Groups

*As someone who has benefitted greatly from Dr. Luthar’s meticulous scholarship, I am delighted to see her systematically focus on enhancing supportive relationships. In a culture that too often promotes individuality over communality, Authentic Connections offers a much needed antidote. Great work Dr. Luthar and Authentic Connections. Now if we only had you in every school and every workplace!*

- **Madeline Levine, PhD**

Co-founder of Challenge Success; Bestselling author of *The Price of Privilege* & *Teach Your Children Well*

Join virtual Authentic Connection Groups -- with others in the same community or from different communities

Sign up: [bit.ly/acgjoin](https://bit.ly/acgjoin)

(Website: [bit.ly/aconnections](https://bit.ly/aconnections))