

## CHAPTER I

# PARENT PANIC

## It Takes You by Surprise

**O**ne day as I sat on the bleachers at our local pool waiting for my daughter Allie to swim time trials, I saw Susan, another mother from our team, running along the edge of the pool. A stopwatch in her right hand, her left arm pumping by her side, she bent over, screaming to her son Seth as he swam. “Faster, *faster!*” I heard her shouting. “Come on! Go!”

As Seth touched the wall, Susan snapped her stopwatch button and checked the time, frowning. Shoulders hunched forward and muttering to herself, she came to sit on the bleachers in front of me, as I waited in the steamy air for the girls’ eight-and-under fifty-yard backstroke to begin.

“Congratulations,” I said with a smile. “Seth had a great swim!”

“He can do better,” Susan said, her face drawn and tight. “He should’ve been two seconds faster. I wish I’d made him practice more this summer, instead of going to camp.” She sighed.

As Seth climbed out of the pool, his body looked tense and he glanced over at Susan with a worried look on his face. I felt sorry for him. He so clearly hadn’t enjoyed the swim.

At the same time I understood Susan’s behavior. Seth was a talented swimmer, and she wanted him to be the best he could be. When Allie started swimming, I’d been tempted to push her too. It’s a decision we all face: *when should you encourage your kid to work hard and excel, and when should you just let her be a kid?*

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It's so hard being a parent sometimes, I thought. You want to do what's best for your child, but sometimes it's difficult to figure out exactly what that is.

I wondered about saying a few words to help Susan relax, but I couldn't think of anything. Besides, she didn't seem open to suggestions.

Just then I spotted Allie in the water, holding the starting bar. My stomach fluttered and I felt edgy. *What if she forgets to touch the wall with both hands?* I thought. Dread suddenly invaded my stomach. I desperately wanted Allie to qualify. I'd never run along the side of the pool as Susan did—and yet, I wanted my kid to stand out too!

Allie clocked in at about a second slower than a year before, but she still qualified. *Maybe I don't push her enough*, I worried. *I don't even know the difference between a good time and a bad time. Maybe I should get a stopwatch and time her, the way Susan times Seth.*

Then Allie walked up to me, smiling, a towel around her waist. My self-doubt vanished. *She likes swimming*, I realized, *and she feels fine about herself.*

But that wasn't the first or last time that I panicked before my daughter's performance or second-guessed my parenting. This mix of anxiety and the nagging feeling that I'm not doing enough visits me often. Not long ago, however, I realized that I'm not alone. This brew of worry is so widespread in this age of advanced parental anxiety that I call it the Pressured Parent Phenomenon, or PPP.

While this phenomenon has always been with us, it has intensified in the last decade or so as competition has invaded our children's lives more than ever.

The PPP is a visceral anxiety, triggered when the ever-increasing competition—academic, athletic, social, or artistic—that our kids face today switches on our physiological hardwiring. It's an internal pressure so strong that we can't rest until we feel our child is safe—has gained admission to that certain magnet school or won a spot in the school orchestra. It brings on tears of empathic hurt when we see our child snubbed by a clique or crying on the basketball court, and it makes us do things that we thought we'd never do—such as pull strings to get our child into a special arts program. The Pressured Parent Phenomenon often kicks in after an incident that affects us more than our child. As one mother remembers about a coach refusing to give her son playing time, “I was definitely more emotional about it than Travis. He wasn't really unhappy.

“But I felt like killing the coach, I was so angry.”

Since the Pressured Parent Phenomenon gives us an urge to push our kids, it alienates our children from us—a result exactly the opposite of what we intended. Because, ironically, it's the absence of pressure that allows our kids both to remain close to us and to succeed.

Now let's explore the Pressured Parent Phenomenon. What is it? Where does it come from? Why is it so strong? Why is every parent prone to it?

## PRESSURED PARENTS ARE EVERYWHERE

Both in my research and in talking to other parents, I've found that anxiety from the competition our kids face has reached epidemic proportions. We all want our kids to excel for their own sake, to feel happy and good about themselves. Most of all, we love and care about our kids and want the best for them. And most often the best means "winning." So when they compete in any way, we're filled with nervous anticipation, fear, anxiety, and even panic. Our children's increasingly competitive lives drive us to emotional heights and depths more extreme than those evoked by our own lives. Even though it's only a question of getting into a certain kindergarten or making the traveling soccer team, we *feel* as though our child's life is at stake. And despite all we do, we worry that we're not doing enough to help our kids succeed.

Many parenting experts criticize parents for these feelings. Stop hovering over your children and living through them, they say. Stop basing your self-esteem on their achievements! Lay off the overscheduling and helicopter parenting. Don't relive your childhood through your kids, they warn.<sup>1</sup> Stop trying to "perfect" them.<sup>2</sup> One psychologist accuses parents of using their children like Prozac, to gain the satisfaction they're not getting from their own spouse or job.<sup>3</sup> *Newsweek* chimes in by scolding parents' "one-upmanship" and "fanaticism" over college admissions, saying it's a "self-serving desire to announce their own success."<sup>4</sup> A recent book even blames excessive devotion to their children for ruining parents' sex lives.<sup>5</sup> We're supposed to cease and desist, to get hold of ourselves, to control our emotions. In other words, we should bury those strong feelings, get rid of them somehow. Begone, scat, good-bye. As if we could do that!

We can't, because these feelings are normal and natural. We all want our kids to shine. These desires are quintessentially human. In fact, if you never feel that way—never feel like pressuring your child—*that's* when I'd worry. As

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embarrassing as it may be to admit feeling “pushy,” that urge simply means you’re a parent.

That’s why the experts’ criticism has done little to stop the pushing; nor has it calmed our anxiety. There are only two strategies that can help parents. The first is banding together and changing institutions—insisting, for example, that schools focus less on grades, or that sports leagues don’t keep score or don’t have younger children practice too often. The second is using the three-part framework of Autonomy, Structure, and Support (detailed in chapters 6 through 9) as tools to turn your anxiety into positive parenting.

### STRESS

The Pressured Parent Phenomenon is closely related to stress—the tension we feel when our children refuse to go to bed or won’t stop wrestling on the living room floor. It’s similar to the stress we experience while driving our kids to ten different places in a twelve-hour period through horrendous traffic and squeezing in a parent-teacher conference on the side. Stress makes us desperately reach for the same solution of taking over and ignoring our child’s autonomy, whether or not that’s a good idea. But the two phenomena are also very different, because stress comes from conditions of the outside world while the Pressured Parent Phenomenon emanates from within.

True, we may focus on the kind of success that eluded us when we were young. A mom who was excluded from the popular clique in high school might wish fervently for her daughter to join the high-status group in her school. A dad who never played for the varsity may obsess over his son’s making the football team. But these personal histories only add emphasis to this general desire we all share for our kids to succeed.

### NARCISSISM AND ENMESHMENT

What about parents who *force* their children to take music lessons or play a sport so that they, the parents, can live through them or brag about them? Some people, after all, are psychologically unable to separate themselves from their kids. Capable of focusing only on themselves, they can’t take their children’s perspective or see them as individuals rather than as extensions of

themselves. Suffering from narcissism, they use their children to fulfill their own needs. These parents have a psychological illness that is quite different from the Pressured Parent Phenomenon.

In the past, psychiatrists and psychologists believed that the roots of controlling parenting lay solely in psychological disorders such as narcissism or family enmeshment. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller tells of parents who—perhaps raised by abusive parents as she was—try to shore up their shaky self-esteem by pushing their children to fulfill their own unfulfilled hopes and desires.<sup>6</sup> They can't recognize, let alone meet, their children's separate needs, since they are so focused on their own neediness.

The championship swimmer who forces his daughter to compete because he misses the glory of his youth or the mother who commandeers her daughter's social life and mesmerizes her boyfriends because she feels unloved would both fall into this category. If her daughter does pursue her own interests, the narcissistic parent scolds her as selfish and inconsiderate. Gazing into their own Grand Canyons of emotional deficit, narcissistic parents can't muster empathy for their kids.

Another pathological cause of parents' controlling their children appears in families that therapists label "enmeshed."<sup>7</sup> The boundaries between members of these families are very porous or nonexistent, and no one has an individual identity. Parents truly "live through their children," feeling their kids' emotions for them, not allowing them to experience their own lives. They are both too close to and too far from their children, intruding in the kids' lives on the one hand but not, on the other, recognizing their distinct identity.

When I worked in family therapy as a clinical psychology trainee, I saw several enmeshed families. Here's the story of one very much like those I saw:

Five-year-old Amy refused to go to kindergarten. Every time her mother tried to walk her to school, the little girl threw up on the sidewalk.

"I don't know why we have any problems," began the mother. "We have such a close family."

The therapist turned toward the little girl.

"Does going to school frighten you?" she asked gently.

"No, I'm sure it doesn't frighten Amy," answered the mother. "We go everywhere—the playground, the mall, the mountains. She loved her playgroup!"

"I'd like Amy to tell me how she feels about going to school," said the therapist.

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The mother moved closer to her daughter on the couch and put her arm around her.

“But I know exactly how she feels,” said the mom. “We’re a *very* close family.”

Enmeshed families aren’t to be confused with families who value the collective over the individual, as in several Asian cultures.

Enmeshment is very problematic and requires professional help. It doesn’t explain any more than extreme narcissism does the far more widespread and everyday feelings of the Pressured Parent Phenomenon.

Most parents are not narcissistic, and few families are as enmeshed as Amy’s. Though protective of their children, the majority of parents can separate themselves from their children and focus on them as individuals. Most parents can empathize with their children’s feelings and desires. But they are still not immune to the PPP.

### POUNGING HEARTS, SWEATY PALMS: *IT’S THE BIOLOGY*

For normal parents, when our kids compete, these feelings of anxiety and the desire for control can be very strong, even overwhelming. When our children take a math test or try out for a singing group, we may feel an anguished desire for them to succeed. We want them to do whatever it takes, come what may. Sometimes I feel—as I did at Allie’s swim trials—as though an alien has invaded my body, filling it with anxiety, fear, and dread.

That’s because the Pressured Parent Phenomenon has a robust physical component. It’s one form of the human stress response. The brain, as though sensing danger, sends the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin rushing into the bloodstream. That gives you a dry mouth and a wildly beating heart. Your muscles tense as the body shifts into its “fight-or-flight” mode. You might even feel as if you’re having a panic attack. Even though your child simply has try-outs for the soccer travel team or is taking a qualifying test for the gifted program, you may feel as though his life hangs in the balance.

That’s how I felt the second week of first grade when Zach got in the car and I asked him about his reading group. Was he a bluebird, a sparrow, or a cardinal? Was he as smart as I thought? My heart thumped under my T-shirt as I waited for him to answer. I felt as though his placement would determine his success as a student over the next sixteen years of his education. And, secretly, I wanted him to be the best reader in the class!

Of course, at the same time, the rational part of my brain knew that kids develop in fits and starts, but that didn't lighten my heartbeats. Knowing that his reading group placement wouldn't really predict whether he'd become a brain surgeon didn't keep me from wanting him to be a star in first grade. Such competitive feelings are so overwhelming that you can't let the facts get in the way.

## POWERFUL FEELINGS

The fierceness of these feelings generated by the Pressured Parent Phenomenon often surprises us.

Gina Kelly, a Newton, Massachusetts, mother of three, remembers her intense reaction to a playground incident when her daughter Nicole was two years old. Nicole hadn't yet said one word. Her best friend, Anna, was two weeks younger. One day, as the two toddlers sat on the seesaw in the park, Anna squealed, "I go up!"

"I couldn't stand it!" Gina told me. "I wanted to push her off the teeter totter! I'm glad that I didn't—Anna is still Nicole's best friend—but I sure felt like it."

## SOMETIMES WE CARE MORE THAN THEY DO

The power of the feelings generated by the Pressured Parent Phenomenon can make us care about certain incidents more than our kids do. Social snubs are a good example. When I was about five, I remember how furious my mother was when Bo, my daily playmate who lived next door, ignored me when another friend of hers came over to play. I was unfazed, perhaps because both girls were two years older than I was. But it infuriated my mother so much that she forbade me to play with Bo ever again.

Parents similarly hold onto their feelings long after the child has forgotten the triumph or the rejection. My friend Sheila's daughter, Katie, for example, is a successful lawyer, but Sheila still smarts from her daughter's rejection by her first-choice college, which apparently didn't weight her grades for the many AP courses she'd taken.

"Katie had a fabulous experience at college," says Sheila. "She loved UC Santa Cruz—it had everything she wanted.

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“As Katie would say, she moved on a long time ago. But I haven’t completely,” says Sheila, laughing at the apparent absurdity. “I’m still mad she didn’t get into Northwestern.”

Of course, it’s ridiculous for a college to turn down a student for taking challenging courses, but that fact only incenses Sheila more.

### THEY SNEAK UP ON US: SURPRISING FEELINGS

We’re usually unprepared for these strong feelings and the sweaty palms and heart palpitations that come with them. They sneak up on us unaware.

I don’t expect to feel nervous whenever my kids’ report cards arrive in the mail, yet sometimes I find my hands shaking. I try not to buy into the hysteria about college and I genuinely believe that my goals are for my children to work hard, enjoy learning, and be kind and ethical young people. Yet every spring, the high school newspaper list of where that year’s seniors are going to college stages a surprise attack on me. I avidly scan the page, wanting to know which student won which brand-name admission, where the children of parents whom I know “got in.” The thrill of the competition sucks me in, just as do the Oscars or *Dancing with the Stars*. All the while I realize that my interest is frivolous. I’ve seen enough kids go on to college and graduate to realize that a degree from a prestigious school doesn’t make anyone successful, happy, or rich. After a few minutes of intense absorption, I laugh at my silliness—but I haven’t stopped looking at that list yet.

### DOING WHAT WE THOUGHT WE’D NEVER DO

A teacher once told me that she used to have many parent volunteers in her classroom. However, she noticed that some of the parents craned their necks to see the grades of other people’s children. One day the teacher left the room for a minute. When she came back, she saw one of the volunteers peeking into her grade book. That was the end of *that* volunteer system. Now she allows parents to help her only if their children are in different classrooms.

Can you imagine yourself peeking into the roll book of your child’s teacher? No, of course not. Yet when your child tells you how he did on a test, don’t you sometimes find yourself asking how his friends did?

The fact is that sometimes these surges of competitive feeling make us act in ways that we never thought we would. My friend's daughter Juliet, who lives in Manhattan, was applying to preschools for her three-year-old daughter. Competition was fierce—there were four applicants for every spot in the schools that everyone said were “the best.”

“I never thought of myself as trendy or status conscious, but suddenly I was determined to get Zoë into the best school I could find,” says Juliet, a theater administrator. “For a few weeks, nothing else mattered. I was like a remote-controlled missile homing in on a school. Nothing would stand in my way. I even called someone I knew who was on the board of the ‘best’ school and asked her to pull strings.

“I hate it when people throw their weight around and exert influence, and I felt *so* embarrassed,” she sighs. “Humiliated is not too strong a word.

“I *never* thought I’d beg for a special favor like that, from someone I barely knew.

“But I felt compelled to do it, and I did.

“It worked.

“Now that Zoë’s eleven, I realize that she could have learned what she needed to at any number of fine preschools. But back then it seemed like she *had* to go to one of the well-known places all the other mothers wanted.”

Civic-minded, socially conscious parents, who theoretically believe in an equal chance for everyone, suddenly find themselves doing whatever it takes to jump their child to the head of the line—to get their kid into a coveted magnet school kindergarten or a special science program. It’s so hard to care about democracy, integration plans, or school board mandates when it seems as though your child’s entire future is at stake.

## MORE TABOO THAN SEX

We seldom talk to each other about these competitive anxieties. Discussing them is more taboo than sex. Have you ever heard anyone say, “I could hardly sleep worrying about whether Brandon will make symphony band,” or “I can’t stand it that his best friend is a shoo-in!”

That’s because we feel ashamed of our competitive angst. In our culture, parents are supposed to nurture, to model for our children that kindergarten lesson about sharing and cooperating. Women, especially, are expected to put

others first. We're not *supposed* to wish for our own child to win and leave other kids in the dust. In some cultures, boasting about your children feels especially shameful and unseemly because parents don't want to humiliate other parents. "I feel horrified when I see one of those bumper stickers saying, 'My child is student of the month,'" a Chinese American father once told me after a talk I gave in Boston. "It's embarrassing if your child is better than someone else's. It's like you're bragging, and making others feel bad." Asian cultures, he reminded me as we chatted, value harmony and uniformity rather than individualism. "That's why the Japanese have the saying 'The nail that sticks out gets pounded down.'"

These competitive feelings also embarrass us because they seem, well, ridiculous. Who will admit to panicking over a child's reading group? How humiliating is it to crave a certain birthday party invitation for your child? We're not supposed to be so insecure, so vulnerable to the judgments of others—particularly those of other kids! Likewise we know that small achievements such as learning to ride a tricycle early mean little in the grand scheme of things and don't indicate whether our child will have a good life—let alone whether he'll have a great future in athletics. So we don't want to let on how much we hang on to our child's every little step forward or back.

I know that I also hesitate to discuss these anxieties because I worry that another parent will claim that he (or she) never panics, and I'll feel ridiculous rather than understood. Even worse, my listener may zero in for the kill, implicitly criticizing me with, "I try not to live vicariously through my child." Or maybe the other parent will brag competitively: "My son is so brilliant that I don't worry about him. The only problem is that he's bored in school."

So when these gut-wrenching emotions overwhelm us, we tend to keep them bottled up inside.

Instead we talk indirectly about our own anxious and competitive feelings by chatting about how *other* parents are pushy, criticizing them for acting on the feelings that we find shameful in ourselves.

"My neighbor has her son scheduled twenty-four/seven," you say, to the clicking tongues and disapproving groans of those sitting nearby at a birthday party. "He goes from Suzuki lessons and Kindergym straight to preschool admission test prep. Oh, and she's got him auditioning for TV commercials, too.

"He's only four. That boy is going to have a nervous breakdown by the time he reaches first grade!"

None of us wants to admit that we feel pushy sometimes too. We defend

ourselves if accused, as did a mother who takes her five-year-old to tutoring. Her preschool didn't teach reading, she explained to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, and the local school system had only a half-day kindergarten.

"I'm not pushy," she said, "but reading is such a critical skill."

We all know someone who is playing Mozart CDs to her pregnant belly.

I'm not immune. When Zach was two, I'm embarrassed to admit, I tried to teach him to read by using the Glen Doman method. ("What for?" asked my mother, to her credit.)

TV reality shows like *Show Biz Moms and Dads* and *Sports Moms and Dads* rivet us because we sense a bit of ourselves in the parents' emotional intensity. They allow us to explore our own feelings without admitting that we have them. Fascinated, we watch other parents act on the same emotions we try to keep a lid on.

Yet we parents face a quandary, because examining only *other* parents' feelings leaves us dealing alone with the panicky gut emotions that emerge as we watch our children competing in an increasingly cutthroat world.

## ANXIETY AND FEAR CAN MORPH INTO RAGE

When we don't air these feelings, the trapped anxiety can morph into a "hard" feeling, such as anger, cloaking the underlying "soft" emotion of worry. That's why we shout furiously at the child who isn't doing his Spanish homework. ("I don't care how late it is! I don't care how sleepy you are! You put off your homework, now sit down and finish it!")

That's also the reason parents erupt in rage at a coach, referee, or teacher who they think is shortchanging their child. I remember seeing the father of a high school soccer player who often followed the referee off the field, waving a finger at him and screaming so furiously that others worried he'd have a heart attack. Another dad's internal pressure brought out his racism. Face flushed crimson, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Go back to Mexico!" at a referee who had ruled against his child's team. The parents of his child's teammates said nothing.

This same parental rage periodically turns violent. In 2000, a dad in Massachusetts killed the father of another player on his son's ice hockey team. Three years later, a retired French army helicopter pilot drugged twenty-seven of his children's tennis opponents, one of whom crashed his car and died

on the way home from a tournament. And remember the Texas mother who tried to murder her daughter's cheerleading rival *and* her mother? Wanda Holloway's 1991 crime spawned a documentary and two made-for-TV movies.<sup>8</sup>

We like to dismiss these people as mentally unbalanced nuts who live through their children. Clearly, they're abnormal because they act on antisocial impulses rather than reining them in. I'm not suggesting that if you don't soothe your anxieties they'll morph into such violence. But these extreme, pathological examples of the Pressured Parent Phenomenon demonstrate how important it is to understand these feelings and learn to deal with them—as I'll show you later.

## IT'S CONTAGIOUS: OTHER PARENTS FAN THE FLAMES

The Pressured Parent Phenomenon is contagious. Often I feel just fine about my kids until a casual conversation on the soccer sidelines turns into a comparison fest.

"We go to Kumon once a week," a mom wearing a Dartmouth sweatshirt told me one day as we watched our kids play. "I didn't think I could fit that in, what with Benjamin's oboe lessons and Cub Scouts, but we're going on Tuesdays, right after soccer."

"And what are you doing over Christmas vacation?" I asked with masochistic verve.

"We're sending him to soccer camp in Brazil.

"And this summer we're going to do our regular road trip. We'll visit every state capital by the end of junior year. That will give Benjamin great material for his college application essay!" she exclaimed.

*College application essay?* I think, my throat tightening.

*But our kids are only twelve years old!*

As the halftime whistle blew, the competitive conversation infused me momentarily with the same "Am I doing the best for my child?" anxiety as I had felt finding out about Zach's reading group. My mind spun off into absurd worries. *Maybe I should be taking Zach to tutoring to pull up that B minus in Spanish,* I thought. *Hmmm, I'd better get going on his summer plans, and oh, my gosh, what would he write his college application essay on?*

"I know just what you mean," says my friend Sheila. "When Katie was applying to college and I talked to other parents at school meetings, they were

in such a frenzy that I often felt like, ‘There must be something I should be doing.’ But I couldn’t figure out exactly what that something was.”

At other times we know exactly what “that” is, as at a school meeting I went to when Jeff was in eighth grade. Every question from parents dealt with honors classes. I barely knew they existed. I started to panic. What did these parents know that I didn’t? Clearly I was out of the savvy parenting loop. Should I set up a teacher conference and insist Jeff take honors classes? Make an appointment on the spot? The PPP had me in its grip.

I tried not to spiral down into the abyss of parental terror, imagining Jeff facing a stack of twenty college rejection letters because he hadn’t taken AP calculus by junior year. Eventually I realized that regular ninth-grade geometry would fit Jeff just fine, but it was very difficult for me to resist the anxious wave that swept over the meeting room that night.

Sometimes parents catch the anxiety over practices that begin healthily enough but then morph into a social trend or even an epidemic. Though some parents are advised by schools to hold their children back in school to benefit from an extra year of development, you hear that many people are deciding themselves to hold their kids back from kindergarten for a year or “red-shirting” them to give them an “extra advantage.”<sup>9</sup> It’s hard not to get caught up in the frenzy. You think, *What do these parents know that I don’t? I don’t want my child to miss out!*

TV commercials for “educational” toys and computer programs set off similar alarms, as do advertisements blaring, “Soccer for Tots: Intro to Soccer for Preschoolers” and “Keep Learning in the Summer! Innovative and Creative Tutoring!”

It makes you wonder whether you’re keeping your child from developing a competitive edge. If you don’t send her to Soccer for Preschoolers, will she start out behind the other kids when they all begin league soccer?

## WHERE PARENTAL PANIC COMES FROM AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Parents have always felt such anxieties about their children, but today these emotions are skyrocketing to new heights of intensity.

There are ways to turn that anxiety into positive parenting, however. Here’s how two parents I know did just that. Both Lucy Pollard and her

husband, Rich, had been athletic growing up. But when their son Travis was eleven, Lucy noticed that when two “captains” chose up teams at club soccer practices, he was always chosen last. “My heart used to go, ‘Oh, my God, how can Travis stand that?’” remembers Lucy, a former teacher. “I wanted to die.” On weekends the club team traveled all over Los Angeles for games, but Travis was lucky to get ten minutes of playing time.

One night at a meeting, the coach told the parents that every boy would play at least half of every game.

“I couldn’t take it, so I piped up, ‘How about Travis?’” Lucy remembers. “He hardly even gets to play.”

“Well, Travis has a stride problem,” said the coach. “He can’t coordinate his legs.”

Lucy burst into tears. “I could not stop crying,” she remembers. “It was horrible. You get so caught up in this stuff as a parent. It was so humiliating. I was hurting for Travis, but I felt like it was happening to me.”

At home Lucy drew Rich into the kitchen while Travis watched TV in the living room. “I want Travis to quit,” she whispered. “This coach is so mean to him. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“I don’t think he wants to quit,” said Rich. “He’s not unhappy. We’re the ones who are unhappy.”

Lucy and Rich continued driving long distances every weekend for the club games. “We suffered,” Lucy says, especially since she’d have rather spent that time hiking and camping as a family. But still Travis barely played in the soccer matches. It didn’t seem to bother him though. “I was definitely more emotional about it than either Travis or Rich,” says Lucy. “I felt like killing the coach, I was so angry.

“What really bothered me was that the coach didn’t say ‘Let’s figure out how Travis can get a better stride.’”

The Pollards didn’t talk to the coach. “Both Rich and I played varsity sports in high school and college,” explains Lucy. “We loved being athletic and both knew that you have to work hard to get good at a sport and it’s up to you alone to achieve that, not having your parents talk or complain to the coach.

“We would have helped him improve his stride,” adds Lucy, “but we didn’t really know what the coach meant. We didn’t think he would enlighten us if we asked.”

Besides, Travis didn’t want them to.

Lucy and Rich never told Travis about their concerns that he didn’t get

much playing time, nor did they tell him he had to improve. “Basically we were encouraging—trying to find something he did that was good,” says Lucy.

The following year after the coach said at a meeting that the kids should consider soccer more important than school, several of the families decided to pull their sons out of the club. One of the dads said he’d be willing to coach a new team for those boys.

As they drove home from the meeting, Rich asked Travis what he wanted to do. “I don’t know,” he answered.

“Do you want to stay with the club? Go with the other dad?” asked Lucy.

“I guess I want to stay with the club. But I don’t get much playing time,” said Travis.

“You could go with the new team,” suggested Rich.

“I don’t know,” Travis said again. He seemed confused.

“You know, there’s always the American Youth Soccer Organization [AYSO],” said Lucy. Travis had played AYSO before he’d made the club team.

When they got home Lucy said, “You know, Travis, whatever you decide is fine with us. We’ll support you in club, AYSO, or even taking a year off from soccer. We’ll help you find a good AYSO team if you want and I’m sure your dad will be happy to go out and practice with you too. Whatever you want, we’ll back you.”

A few days later on the way to school, Travis told Rich he thought he might want to try AYSO. Some of his friends at school played in that league, he said.

Rich felt disappointed because he knew the level of play was higher in club soccer, but he kept that thought to himself. When he told Lucy, she pointed out that the low-pressure atmosphere of AYSO might give Travis more playing time. Plus there would be only one practice a week and much less driving to the games.

They told Travis he’d made a very good decision.

“Leaving the club was the best thing he ever did, because that club situation was hurting him,” says Lucy. “It was like he knew he needed to go back to AYSO.”

The AYSO coach switched Travis from offense, which he’d always played in club soccer, to sweeper, a defense position. Lucy praises that coach, who had played varsity soccer in college. “He was wonderful, very nurturing and very specific about how Travis could get better.”

Travis improved greatly. “He just blossomed,” says Lucy. He won a spot on the AYSO tournament team, and made a lot of friends.

When he went to high school, Travis made the varsity team and soon became a star. The original club coach asked him to return to his team. Travis agreed, and this time around he got lots of playing time. He also played varsity volleyball and won the Best Athlete of the Year award during his senior year.

As I write, Travis is a twenty-six-year-old college graduate who works as a graphic artist. He played club soccer through college and now plays on a weekend team with a group of friends from his high school.

“After you and I talked yesterday,” Lucy told me recently, “I asked Travis how he felt about the sports he played growing up, and he said that he absolutely loved them. He also said that—though he realized his dad had been sad when he quit baseball in high school—he never felt pushed. It was all his self-motivation and interest.”

Despite the turbulent emotions aroused in them by the club soccer coach, the Pollards managed to focus on how their son felt and what he wanted. They respected his autonomy by not insisting he quit the club team and directed their energy toward supporting and encouraging him.

Lucy and Rich’s daughter Kristen, two years younger than Travis, also played club and high school soccer and volleyball. “We did it because the kids wanted to do it. We kind of followed their lead,” says Lucy.

Even though competition in our children’s lives is mounting, the Pollards’ story shows how parents can cope effectively with their resulting fear. In later chapters we’ll see how—ironically—eliminating pressure helps kids excel.