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Published February 4th, 2009

Family Focus: High School - The Best Years of Our Lives?

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

People in my line of work can say the same thing about practicing therapy as Forrest Gump said about life: "Therapy is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get." Some unpredictable issues arise from time to time.

I've been seeing a college sophomore, "Mia," for over a year, working with her on building confidence and developing healthier relationships. Recently she mentioned how upset she is to have missed out on the best years of her life. When I asked her to explain, Mia said her high school years were supposed to be the best time of her whole life, but she didn't enjoy them. Evidently, she had heard this notion from her parents, a teacher, and some of her friends.

The problem with this concept is twofold; if these years are indeed the best years, then what is there to look forward to afterwards? And if they are the best years, but people like Mia didn't enjoy them, how sad and depressing to have missed out!

This idea must have originated decades ago, before many of the current pressures in high school existed. The pressures these days are immense: excelling in academics, sports, and other extracurricular activities, being popular and well-liked, getting into a good college, being physically attractive, and maintaining good relationships with family and friends. Often there are financial concerns, family disruptions, and emotional issues with which to contend.

I asked some friends whether their high school years were the best ones of all and got a mixed response. As for me, I think I peaked in fifth grade! No matter what our own experiences were, we need to be careful not to create expectations in the minds of our children. They need to know there is much to look forward to, and the pressures they face in high school will ease in many respects as they get older.

Many college students from the Lamorinda area remark how they find college much easier than high school. Fortunately, they have been well-prepared in our schools, and they finally have more time for themselves after the harried pace of high school. By college, some students think that these must be the best years of their lives.

High school students need reassurance that while these years are full of ups and downs, the best is yet to come.

I am preparing a column on parents' regrets. We all have some regrets about what decisions we have made as parents. What would you say or do differently in retrospect? Hearing about other parents' regrets can help us avoid feeling too guilty and also allow us to learn from each other. Please email your regret to margierye@yahoo.com. I will use your name only if you authorize permission; otherwise the submissions will be anonymous.

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