

Angling for the Good Spots: Moral dilemmas in cultivating teenagers

Abstract

SAT tutoring is used as “concerted cultivation” by upper-middle-class families to help their teens get ahead. Some families feel compelled to take part despite ethical misgivings about inequality in access. School counselors are in position to help families make sense of their options and, potentially, support de-escalation.

Key words: college admissions, concerted cultivation, cultural capital, test prep, SAT tutoring

Audrey Devine-Eller

Assistant Professor, Grinnell College

audrey.devine.eller@gmail.com

Wherever SAT scores are important in college admissions, SAT tutoring is part of the story about college access inequalities. Higher-income students have better access to high-cost and high-quality test prep, an investment that pays off in score improvements and college admissions (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010).

The frenzy for elite college admissions is not without cause; admissions are increasingly competitive in part because students with higher school achievements have better jobs, more economic stability, higher levels of knowledge and cognitive development, higher political and social participation, higher psychological well-being, better physical health, and lower mortality rates (Pallas, 2000). Who can blame parents for seeking these advantages for their children? The proliferation of “how-to” books and insider’s accounts of the admissions process both reflects and encourages the stress of keeping up with demanding academics and extracurriculars while vying for slots at the most prestigious colleges (Robbins, 2006; Steinberg, 2002; Toor, 2001) .

But socioeconomic differences account for almost all the inequality in college entry and graduation rates (Hout, 2012). Well-off teens engage in intense résumé-polishing in preparation for scrutiny by admissions officers (Redding, 2013; Stevens, 2007). Savvy students who game the system by applying early have acceptance rates double or even triple the normal pool (Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2003; Park & Eagan, 2011). They get in with lower scores, but give up the ability to compare financial aid and merit scholarships, so this is a route predominantly open to those who do not balk at “sticker prices.” Overall, most of the students at elite colleges come from upper-middle-class or elite families (Khan, 2011).

As a long-time SAT tutor, I saw high-scoring, high-income students looking to maximize their advantage. I interviewed the families of five of these teens, all of whom were taking the

SAT as juniors in high school. The families were all white, upper-middle-class, two-parent households living in suburban Central New Jersey. I asked about their goals for SAT tutoring and the future, what they thought tutoring meant and how they felt about it¹.

Concerted cultivation as a way of life

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, argued that parents pass on to their children distinctive cultural knowledge which he called cultural capital (1984 [1979]). Schools reward students for the cultural competencies they bring to schooling rather than for how they perform once they are in the system. Annette Lareau's (2003) research shows that (upper-)middle-class children learn when and how to ask for individual customized accommodation (for example, from doctors or teachers). Their parents used "concerted cultivation" to promote success in institutional contexts. For example, they attend parent-teacher conferences, question and criticize schools and teachers, enroll students in adult-supervised, scheduled activities, and obtain expert help. In contrast, working-class and poor families parent through the "accomplishment of natural growth," a strategy not institutionally rewarded. Lareau found deep inequalities between these groups in who started and finished college by age 21 (2008).

Concerted cultivation parenting strategies stem from a taken-for-granted habit by which parents provide enrichment, including in families' daily lives. SAT verbal scores are built around the dinner table, not just with tutors (Heath, 1983). These (culturally) instinctive behaviors are strong enough to shape everything about the family's life, and yet are also often unquestioned to the point of becoming invisible. When I asked Jim's parents, for example, to tell me what, besides the private school and SAT tutoring, they did to help Jim, they said:

Father: At this stage of the game? Um not too much. I mean, some. Well, we do stuff for him –

Mother (interrupting): Our whole life revolves around him!

Jim's father's comment illustrates how intensive parenting can become invisible. When parents are accustomed to prioritizing a child in their mental, emotional, financial, and time expenditures, doing 'nothing' and 'everything' can seem the same. Other families had similar difficulties verbalizing all the myriad things they did to help their children, which included SAT tutoring, academic assistance (including tutoring), choice of school, family vacations, students' activities, and where they lived.

Among these families, it was the norm for parents to intervene for specialized treatment for their children – in getting the good teachers and the right tracks, in demanding attention from college counselors, and, of course, in paying for SAT tutoring. When Brian missed the mandatory 11th grade state testing due to a family vacation, the counselor told him he would have to drop AP Literature to take a remedial class his senior year. His mother recounted:

He marches right into the principal's office. See it's good for him to be that way because if this guy does make a few little errors . . . Brian will be more on top of it, in his face, and if the guy tries to get away with just one little thing Brian will not let him get away with it. He came home that day and he was freaking out but he didn't know that I had already spoken to the guidance counselor on the phone. I told [the guidance counselor], 'This is what we are going to do.' He told me about taking the remedial classes next year and I said, 'I don't think we're going to have

to worry about that.’ So then after he talked to the principal and a few other people that was sort of out of the way.

Brian’s mother was willing to argue for an exemption for Brian, thus modeling for him how to obtain customized accommodation from the school, and ensuring the academic advantage of taking AP Literature. Parents felt that being able to intervene on the part of one’s child was crucial to ensuring best possible education.

But parents are not involved in teens’ daily lives in the same way they are involved with younger children; as Lareau and Horvat (1999) note, older children learn to take a more independent role in their own cultivation. Even as the transition to adulthood lengthens and helicopter parents garner scorn (Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Levine, 2006) , teens take on increasing responsibility for the daily management of their own lives. Teens are not merely empty vessels bearing the cultural capital of their parents, but can “successfully [or unsuccessfully] use their cultural capital to move toward higher education” (Valadez, 1998). Teens learn and internalize ways of cultivating themselves. Families spoke of their desire to make teens self-motivated and high-achieving without “helicoptering.” All the students I interviewed reported independently initiating interest in SAT tutoring. Brian took on the project of test prep entirely by himself, including scheduling and authorizing charges to his parents’ credit card; his parents had only to decide how much money they would spend. Indeed, our interview was the first time I spoke to Brian’s mother, though I had been meeting with Brian in their home for eight months already.

SAT tutoring is a specific act of concerted cultivation, transforming parents’ economic capital into children’s cultural capital. It is a way for parents to pass on educational advantages to their children, and it represents a specialized, pragmatic, out-of-school intervention that other children do not receive (Byun & Park, 2012) . All the families described their primary

motivation for SAT tutoring as increasing students' SAT scores. "Customized accommodation" is a useful way to think about what SAT tutoring, specifically, does: tutoring offers more efficient and targeted assistance, or as Jason's mother put it, "we could employ some customization to [Jason's] skill needs." Brendan, another student, declined SAT classes because he thought they "seem to cater to the lowest common denominator." Tutoring could be customized both to students' academic needs and to their busy schedules.

Moral dilemmas of concerted cultivation

Families viewed SAT tutoring as providing a competitive advantage in college admissions through higher SAT scores. Brian specified that it wasn't the tutoring itself that provided advantage, but the resulting higher score that would lead to a better college, then a better job, and then "ahead." Jason and Kate wanted very high scores in order to be competitive at Ivy League colleges. Kate put it bluntly: "It's not necessarily about how well you do. It's about doing better than the people you're competing against."

Parents explained and justified their intense financial investment into their children by comparison to their children's peers. All five of these high-scoring students reported that nearly everyone they knew was also doing SAT prep. Since admissions officers regularly compare applicants against others from the same high school (Steinberg, 2002; Stevens, 2007), families are right to think this is a zero-sum game.

Some families relished this competition, like Kate, whose goal was to get to the best college she could, casualties be damned. Others saw it as a true ethical dilemma in which they could stand on principle about inequality, or help their child, but not both. Jim's father

characterized test prep as part of an “intellectual arms race.” Jim’s mother described the dilemma at length:

Well it’s almost like your moral obligation as a parent is to do whatever you can to make sure your kid is ready to take these stupid [tests]. [...] you know it doesn’t seem right that there are such inequities in terms of the kinds of access kids have to things like SAT prep and access to adults who know how the system works and access to money, but my job as a parent is to do everything I can to help my kid be successful. But, it’s actually exactly like things that happened when he was in elementary school in terms of tracking; the reality of our school system is that if you don’t know what you’re doing as a parent and you don’t speak out you’re not going to get the best for your kid because there’s all these other people are going to be there angling for the good spots. But I hate being that way. I hate being that kind of parent.

Jim’s parents are sensitive to the fact that their getting ahead requires that others fall behind. Despite their guilt, the moral obligation to help Jim succeed trumped the moral obligation to limit wider economic inequities.

One way parents justified this competitive advantage was by reframing concerted cultivation as “remedial” rather than “extra.” They described their children’s real or perceived shortcomings as reasons for SAT tutoring. Jim’s mother, for example, was concerned about medications taken during her pregnancy. Thus (despite her clear articulation of the intellectual arms race) she said, “I never really thought about this as helping my kid get ahead. I feel like I want to buffer him in the event that something isn’t quite right.” Similarly, Jason’s mother wanted to ameliorate any lingering effects of a learning disability for which Jason received

interventions before kindergarten. These narratives cannot be taken at face value when both children in question take all AP or honors courses and have SAT scores above the 90th percentile. Rather, such stories soothe consciences that might otherwise be troubled by the competitive advantage available to their children.

Is de-escalation possible?

The “intellectual arms race” implies an escalation of academic interventions among those who can afford them. Intensification from the peer group may make tutoring seem a natural and even necessary activity. Other researchers show escalation in decisions of schooling, housing, extracurricular activities, and course-taking (Brantlinger, 2003; Friedman, 2013; Johnson, 2006; Lareau & Weininger, 2008) . Lareau (2003) is careful to note the costs of concerted cultivation, and at some point the institutional advantages of this parenting strategy may backfire. Already medical and educational experts report concern about overscheduled, overstressed children (Levine, 2006; Marklein, 2006; Redding, 2013; Weissbourd, 2011). But there may be an ethical cost, too, in providing relative advantage to one’s own children: as Weis, Cipollone and Jenkins (2014) argue, this looks like class warfare. School staff might be implicated in the battle, too, as they come under pressure to support the escalators, but feel morally committed to educational equality. Knowing more about families who can afford concerted cultivation but decide against it (What makes them different? How do they decide? How do their children fare?) might help us see how educational professionals can encourage thoughtful de-escalation.

Practical advice for counselors

- Parents' visibility says little about their involvement. Apparently "uninvolved" parents might be carefully managing their teen's education from the background.
- Teens vary in their abilities to take over management of their daily lives. Some can (or must) handle pretty much everything. Communicate college-planning information directly to teens as well as to parents.
- Parents might relish the "intellectual arms race," or they might feel compelled to participate. Counselors might programmatically encourage reflection on social equality as a part of the college transition. Families might need guidance figuring out the costs and benefits, how to resist the pressure toward intensification, how to define success for themselves, and how to remain sane throughout the stressful process.
- Consider how to support students who do not have the family resources for tutoring or expert help; there may be local resources they can draw on.

| Student* | School | 11th grade courses | Student interests | Parent occupations | Interview participants | Goal score** | College Attended |
|----------|--|---|--|---|------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| Brendan | highly-ranked public school | AP English, AP Language and Composition, AP World History, Calculus, Spanish | gymnast 20 hours/week | mother is a professor; father is a lawyer | Brendan | 2000 | New York University |
| Brian | large highly-ranked suburban public | AP Lit, AP U.S. History, honors physics and honors Spanish | very active in school, community, and church activities | mother does the accounting & payroll for father's construction company | Mom, Brian | >2000 | George Washington University |
| Jason | large, highly-ranked suburban public | AP Language & Composition, AP Biology, AP Calculus BC, AP U.S. History, honors Spanish, honors band | active with arts outside school | mother is a vice president in a healthcare company & travels frequently; father is a physician | Mom, Jason | >2250 | Yale University |
| Jim | private boarding school several hundred miles away | AP History and AP Spanish, but opted out of an honors English class | manager of school baseball team; active with Boy Scouts and his church | both parents are professors | Mom, Dad | 2000 | Hamilton College |
| Kate | large highly-ranked suburban public | AP Literature, AP U.S. History, advanced Precalculus and advanced science | very active with community service, her church, and student government | father is a vice president in a healthcare company, where mother also worked until she had children | Mom, Dad, Kate | >2100 | Boston College |

*Student names are pseudonyms and interests are changed to protect confidentiality. College names, however, are undisguised.

**On a 600-2400 point scale.

Table 1. Descriptions of students and interview participants.

References

- Arnett, J. J., & Tanner, J. L. (2005). *Emerging adults in america: Coming of age in the 21st century* (1st ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Avery, C., Fairbanks, A., & Zeckhauser, R. (2003). *The early admissions game: Joining the elite*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984 [1979]). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* [Distinction.]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brantlinger, E. A. (2003). *Dividing classes: How the middle class negotiates and rationalizes school advantage*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Buchmann, C., Condon, D., & Roscigno, V. (2010). Shadow education, american style: Test preparation, the SAT, and college enrollment. *Social Forces*, 89(2), 435-461.
- Byun, S., & Park, H. (2012). The academic success of east asian american youth: The role of shadow education. *Sociology of Education*, 85(1), 40-60.
- Friedman, H. L. (2013). *Playing to win: Raising children in a competitive culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge Cambridgehire; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hout, M. (2012). Social and economic returns to college education in the united states. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38(1), 379-400.
- Johnson, H. B. (2006). *The american dream and the power of wealth: Choosing schools and inheriting inequality in the land of opportunity*. New York: Routledge.
- Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The making of an adolescent elite at st. paul's school*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72(1), 37-53.
- Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2008). Class and the transition to adulthood. In A. Lareau, & D. Conley (Eds.), *Social class* (pp. 118-151). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Levine, M. (2006). *The price of privilege: How parental pressure and material advantage are creating a generation of disconnected and unhappy kids* (1st ed.). New York: HarperCollins.
- Marklein, M. B. (2006, March 20). Advanced coursework: An 'arms race' among students. *USA Today*
- Pallas, A. M. (2000). The effects of schooling on individual lives. In M. T. Hallinan (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of education* (pp. 499-525). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Park, J. J., & Eagan, M. K. (2011). Who goes early?: A multi-level analysis of enrolling via early action and early decision admissions. *Teachers College Record*, 113, 2345-2373.
- Redding, A. B. (2013). Extreme pressure: The negative consequences of achievement culture for affluent students during the elite college admission process. *Journal of College Admission*, (221), 32-37.
- Robbins, A. (2006). *The overachievers: The secret lives of driven kids* (1st ed.). New York: Hyperion.
- Steinberg, J. (2002). *The gatekeepers: Inside the admissions process of a premier college*. New York; London: Viking.

- Stevens, M. L. (2007). *Creating a class: College admissions and the education of elites*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Toor, R. (2001). *Admissions confidential: An insider's account of the elite college selection process*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Valadez, J. R. (1998). Applying to college: Race, class, and gender differences. *Professional School Counseling, 1*(5), 14.
- Weis, L., Cipollone, K., & Jenkins, H. (2014). *Class warfare: Class, race, and college admissions in top-tier secondary schools*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Weissbourd, R. (2011). The overpressured student. *Educational Leadership, 68*(8), 22-27.

¹ All five families I asked consented to an audio-recorded interview that lasted 40-60 minutes. Families themselves decided who would be present for the interview; I interviewed four of the mothers, four of the teens, and two of the fathers (see Table 1). All interviews were conducted in the family's home, generally at the kitchen table. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using an iterative process of reading for themes and re-reading for contradictory evidence. Quotations have been edited for readability; minimal positive responses (uhuh, yeah) have been removed, pauses and false starts have been smoothed, and punctuation was added. All names are pseudonyms.

Having been their tutor, I worried that students would feel compelled to participate, so I waited until the end of our tutoring relationship to request an interview and constructed several face-saving ways students could avoid the interview. No one turned me down. I believe that my longstanding relationships with the families improved the reliability and depth of the interviews. Families talked to me about sensitive and controversial topics. Because these interviews were drawn from a small convenience sample, I use them to highlight themes that have not yet been described by other researchers.