

The Effects of Parental High Expectations on Middle School Students' Overall Achievement

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Abstract:

Positive influence of parental involvement on their children's academic performance has been widely reported and proved in a good number of research. However, little attention has been given to the negative influence that the high parental expectations may cause to their children performance and motivation. This current study investigates the parental high expectations on their children academic achievement and motivation. It also attempts to explore the adolescents' perception of the influence of their parent' expectations on their motivation. To do this, 160 middle and high school students in a public school were surveyed and seven were interviewed to collect data. The results showed that children achievement did not seem to get noticeably worse at a certain task that were pressured into doing, but rather they got exactly what their parents want from them. They also revealed that parents usually decide the expectations without estimating their children's abilities and interests. Based on the results analysis, some implications and recommendations are provided for parents and educators to consider supporting adolescents in their academic journey.

Keywords: parental expectations, academic achievement, adolescents, academic abilities, aspirations

1. Introduction

Although the tradition of parents setting high expectations on their children has been normalised and seen as a positive influence. To date, parents, teachers, and peers are among the factors that influence students' academic achievement. The complex interactions between these factors can contribute to or inhibit student's learning potential (Phillipson 2008). A positive relationship was identified between parental expectations and academic success among European American and African American high school students (Kuru Cetin, & Taskin, 2016).

Davis-Kean (2005) defined parental academic expectations as their beliefs and demands about the future academic achievements of their children. These expectations affect the kid's effort and attitudes towards his/her studies and ultimately impact academic achievements. However, it is important to differentiate between parental expectations and aspirations, where the latter consider desires, goals and wishes that parents have for their children's achievements instead of realistic expectations (Samura, 2015).

However, some expectations can be harmful to children. Higher parental expectations than children's actual abilities can degrade and demotivate them in case of failure to meet the expectations (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002). Jones (2015) maintained that excessive parental expectations may cause stress among students and that negatively impacts their academic achievements. Due to the nature of many children being helpless and dependant, they often rely on a caregiver despite the treatment they get in return. Therefore, resulting from this dependence a child assumes that whatever role given to them by their caregivers must be met and accepted (Cikanavicius, 2019). As a result, the child would not be able to differentiate between what is healthy for them and what is not, they will tend to think that it is indeed normal. This is referred to as normalisation (Cikanavicius, 2019). This process has been accepted in parenting for a long time and has tormented children's relationships with their parents, created false hope and caused many people to suffer all their lives from oppressive feeling of guilt, the sense of not having lived up to their parents' expectations.

It is largely known that as parents' expectations get higher, the child tends to hide many parts of their identity assuming a false personality to appear to conform to their parents' expectations (Braucher, 2020). This phenomenon has also led more children to score less than average academically when high scores has been expected from them (Anderson, 2015). As a result, children are becoming more and more confused with their identity and the intentions of their parents. They

are trying to be the best version of the expectations while also thinking about what they want to achieve, that cycle drains them out and creates sediments of distress that usually breaks out later in their life even when they become less dependent on their parents. Therefore, it is necessary for us to investigate how parental high expectations affect children's achievements and motivation.

2. Literature Review

To understand why this study analyses the experiences of participants and how they have taken an effect of the high parental expectations, it is important to look at existing research regarding this topic. There are a few studies on how parental expectations leads to a higher achievement rate among children; however, there are studies that suggest that excessive parental expectation can be detrimental (Anderson, 2015). These specific studies analyse the patterns of the aftermath of parental high expectations and how children respond to them with how much they achieve.

Research has also shown that parental expectations are associated with children's engagement and motivation (Lazarides, Viljaranta, Aunola, Pesu, & Nurmi, 2016; Long & Pang, 2016; Yeung et al., 2010) children's self-efficacy (Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles, 2012), and adolescents' academic expectations (Froiland et al., 2013).

Anderson (2015) pointed out that when parents had high aspirations for their children's achievement in math, the kids performed well. But if the parents' hopes were unrealistic, their children's math performance suffered. This study suggests that children look forward to achieving as much as their parent's state, but as soon as their expectations exceed the child's capabilities they start performing badly. Murayama (2016), who is a lead author of the University of Reading, resumed that raising aspiration cannot be an effective solution to improve success in education, and that parents might do more than state demands on the academic achievement of their child without spending more time with them. Murayama also concluded that parents who are more involved in their children's lives are more likely to hold higher expectations for their children's education and that investing time with their children influences their expectations. Both studies tend to come in terms with the hypothesis that parental expectations do alter a child and their attainment. The studies conclude by comparing academically opposite capabilities in children and what can or cannot be expected from them.

Furthermore, research explaining briefly exactly why some expectations are helpful while others are harmful can contribute to the founding above. Braucher (2020) studied the psychological effects of the subjects while being carried out in both helpful and harmful ways. As the study conducted those children developed a sense of themselves from how they were experienced by their parents so joy in parents allowed their children to experience joy, which as a result, parental disappointment created a sense of disappointment in a child about themselves. Additionally, Braucher explained in depth how parents with contradicting expectations led their child start to develop a false identity to keep up. A better side of the subject which was as Braucher resumed that those expectations communicated to our children that what they did was important to us. Expectations are a way to show to children attention on what they do by being involved and invested. Concluding his research, Braucher explains how parents are meant to deal with their child as they are whether their expectations are met or not.

DiBartolo & Rendón (2012) concluded that when high parental expectations cannot be fulfilled, parents may respond critically to their children's failures, which in turn may induce stress and depression in adolescents. Studies have demonstrated that high parental expectations are associated with high parental criticism, which may result in adolescents' negative emotions, such as depression.

Consistent with previous studies Ying; Angela & Vincent. (2018) proposed that high parental expectations are associated with adolescents' academic performance through the mediating role of adolescents' value of academic success. Their study investigated the effects of high parental expectations on both academic performance and depression of adolescents. The sample consisted of 872 adolescents from secondary schools in Hong Kong and the results revealed that high parental expectations were positively associated with adolescents' academic performance and positively associated with their depression. The mediating roles of adolescents' value of academic success and school support frequency were also confirmed. This study provides some implications for parenting practice by clarifying the complex roles of parental expectations and the need for social support for adolescents.

Ang & Huan (2006) asserted that both adolescents' self-expectations and expectations from others, such as parents and teachers, are particularly associated with academic stress. If adolescents' own expectations and the expectations of significant others are unable to be met, it may cause them significant amounts stress and potentially result in decreased self-confidence and loss of face among their families, eventually leading to depression. A study in China found that adolescents place high value on their studies and put great effort into enhancing their academic performance, and if they are unable to meet their parental expectations, they may develop feelings of shame, hopelessness, and worthlessness, which are associated with depression (Wang, Fan, Xue, & Zhou, 2015).

Therefore, while some studies may suggest that parental pressure is harmful, little research has shown that they could

result in positive achievements. Some provide that the parental involvement can start off well and gradually get worse in being realistic. Moreover, addressing the gap in previous studies, seeing as the research have not stated the effects of parental pressure in all perspectives that aim at achieving more as well as the long-term effects of it which is the purpose of conducting the present study. We aim at bridging the gap on how it is that parental high expectations can indirectly alter the achievements of a child or an adolescent. This study attempted to answer the question: How do parental high expectations affect a child's achievement?

As a result, our research is unique as it is investigating the effects of high parents' expectations on children's contempt in achieving high. It is centred to the youth group of children and adolescents since mostly the pressure gets to its highest at their age. There has been much research taken place about this topic but none of which address the gradualism of the child's achievement getting worse as well as the long-term effects so it will fill in the gap and possibly make way for new ways to open on the issue.

1. Hypothesis

When parents go overboard with what they want their children to get done, they gradually fall out of that pressure and might even get noticeably worse at that certain task. We also hypothesise that parents might be ignoring what their child are able and unable to perform or what their expectations of themselves are. We have developed this hypothesis after concluding a study mentioned earlier where children had gotten a lower capability in maths after parents expected them to score high. It would be generally seen as a good expectation for parents to have but due to the children's scoring lower than average, we believe that it is caused because of children wanting to only meet up to their parents' expectations and not to their own.

2. The purpose of the Study

In the recent modern world, human knowledge has been undoubtedly expanding as well as the chances for a better future. As a result, children are expected to indulge in more achievements that are mainly taken after parental pressure. However, some parental expectations are going overboard and might have even become harmful to the child. They could be exceeding their capabilities, forcing them to do more than what they should be able to do at their level and indirectly wounding them. Other effects include the child building issues with themselves about what they did and what they could have done better. "Setting expectations too high is counterproductive" So we'd expect children to achieve high with high expectations but to our surprise the higher the expectation the less the child achieves "Although parental aspiration can help improve children's academic performance, excessive parental aspiration can be poisonous" (Anderson, 2015). The main purpose of this research is to examine, explore and discover the effects of parents who have put high expectations for their child to reach meaning a better brighter future, and how that alters the child in terms of successful achievement. The study will be examining the experiences of the participants who have been involved in that situation and how their achievements got effected during that time. The goal is to undergo a process of building a deep understanding of their way of thinking and the problems they might have had to face at the time. In this study, we would like to comprehend what the children had to go through and to willingly share their respected experiences regarding this topic. Furthermore, taking use of the participants claims and responses will aid us in providing a suitable answer to the research question as well as for the entirety of the paper itself.

3. Methodology

This Research method will be the qualitative type of research methods in a sense that it only uses non-numerical data to furthermore the responses and collectible experiences from seven participants. The use of the qualitative research method will carefully accumulate responses, experiences and information and learn directly from participants and provide context for their answers with more description than the quantitative method that mainly is associated with numerical data. We firmly believe that using qualitative research methods are perfectly suited for the topic in terms of gathering information and data.

The main instrument used for collecting data was the interview which consists of seven questions. The aim of the questions was to assist the authors to dive deep into the participants' responses and push the participants to give their best most descriptive responses of what they experienced at a time of parental pressure. The questions are clear and unbiased which provided the participants a lot of freedom of answering with all honesty without being under any influence that might give false responses. Moreover, a survey was also used to collect data about the participants experiences and feelings. The sample for primary quantitative data collection included 160 male school students from a public school which was selected on purpose as the author work and study there.

After receiving the participants' parents' approval and consents, the date, timing, and the mode of the interview were decided by the school leadership. The interviews took approximately between 15- 20 minutes. The data collected was coded to better classify the responses gathered.

4. Findings

This Research has conducted narrative interviews in aims of collecting direct data from participants across the age range of 7-18 years old, recording their experiences to a set of 7 questions. Those questions get gradually deeper and persuade the interviewee to give a more in-depth explanation. A survey was also handed out, it brought back a total of 160 diverse responses. Using the responses gathered from both the interviews and the survey several graphs were made. Three of the most general common themes will be stated and explained to understand the effects of parental high expectations.

i. Survey:

As mentioned earlier, the survey was able to gather anonymous responses from children and teens. 33.9% of the respondents were in the age category of 11-14 years old, 55.9% were between 15-18 years old, and 10.17% of them were 18 years of age and older. The most important aspects of the results have been made into diagrams and figures that can be seen as Figures 1,2, and 3 as represented below.

In Figure 1, respondents were asked if the expectations they have faced have had a positive or negative impact consequently after they have stated whether they have been under the pressure of a parental expectation. As a result, those of which who have responded with “yes” hold a percentage of 84.7 and have also mostly picked “not in a good way” 57.6% of the time. While “no” and “somewhat” have 3.4% and 10% and have only been chosen 3.4% of the time each in “Not in a good way”, and only “somewhat” being chosen 6.8% of the time in “somewhat good”.

Similarly, Figures 2 and 3 go on to be demonstrating the same procedure in which the participants were asked to select the reason they think mostly corresponds to why parents set those high expectations in the first place. It is clearly shown that most of the participants have chosen “teens” as the category who they think mostly suffered with highly parental pressure, in which most of them have also selected “Their children’s future” as the reason. Figure 3 shows a bar chart in which it was asked if, using the experiences they have gone through, they think that the effects of parental high standards last for a long time in a child’s life in which most of them selected “yes” also assuming that parents expect children to excel in “education” most out of the three options. As well as for the participants who have selected “maybe” have also mostly went with “education”.

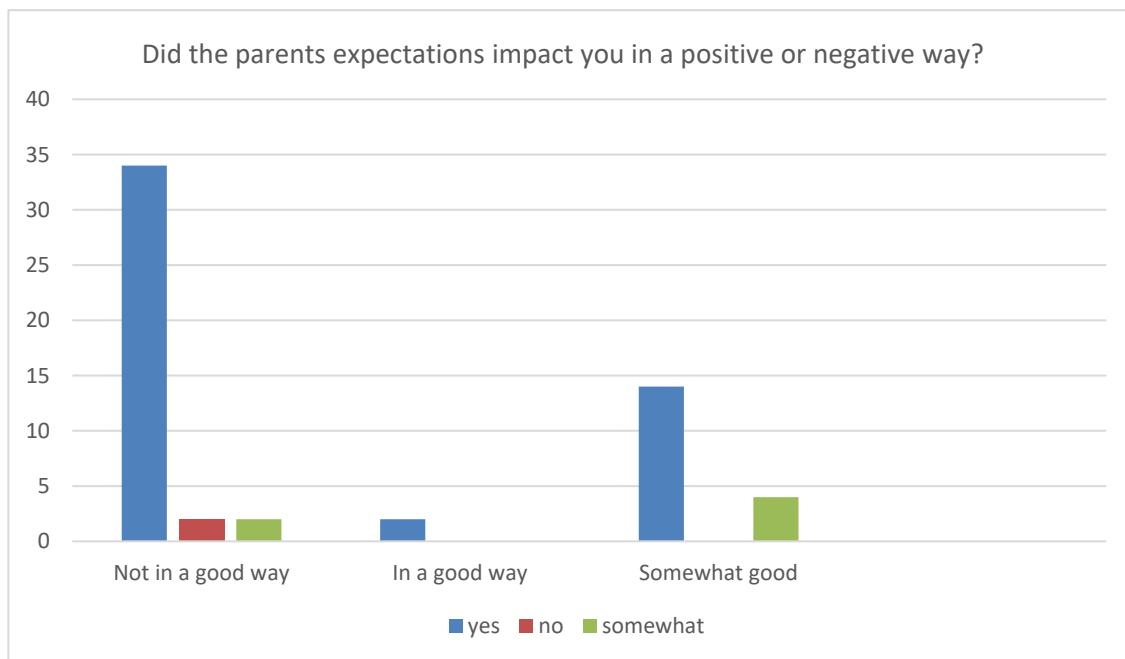


Figure 1. Participants’ perception on the influence of their parents’ expectations

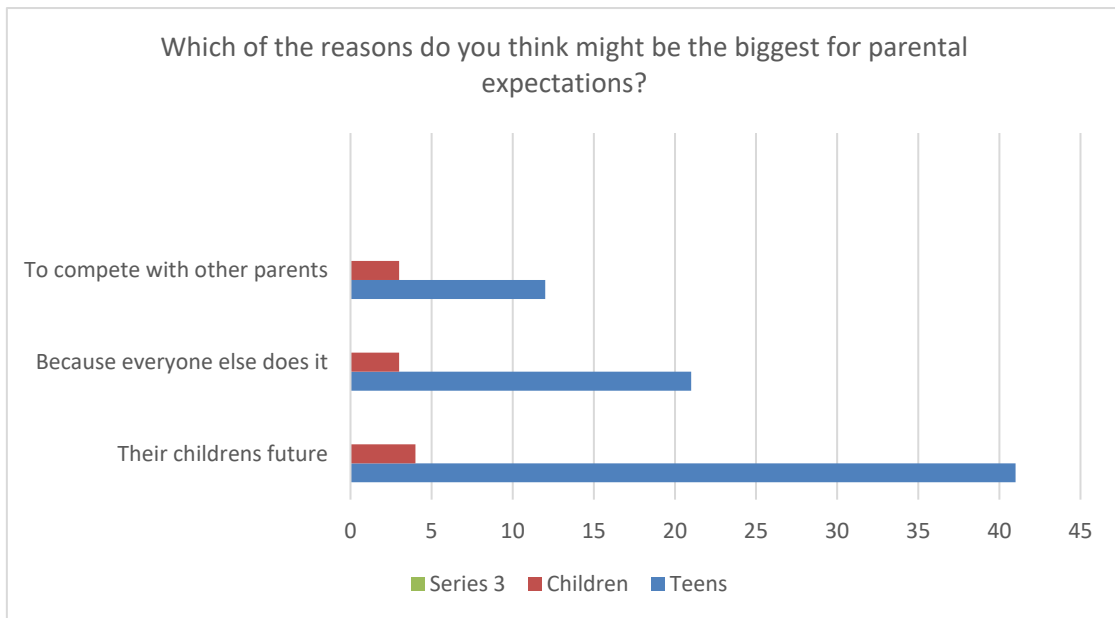


Figure 2. Reasons for parents’ high expectation as reported by participants

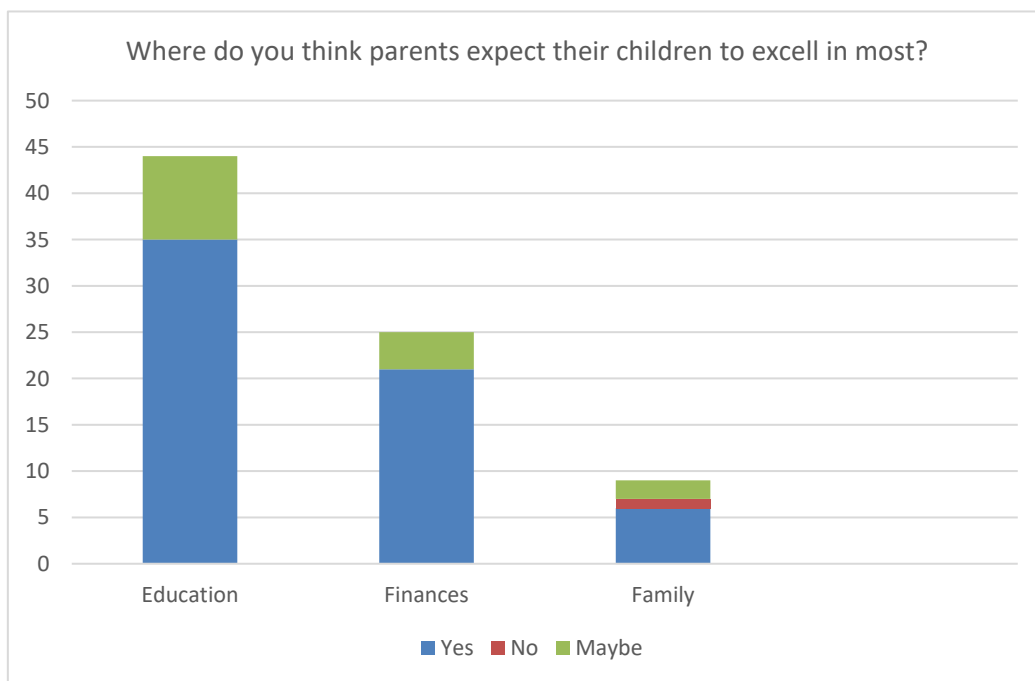


Figure 3. Areas that parents focus on as perceived by the participants

ii. Thematic interviews:

Before moving on into summarizing the interview into more general themes, we must make it clear what each theme is and its definition. After conducting the seven narrative interviews, it was possible for the responses to be divided into a total of three themes, table 1 has the themes explained.

Table 1. Explanation/definition of the themes

| Theme | Explanation/definition |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Mental Health Issues | The result in which the participant faced anxiety, stress, depression, or any other psychological harm during or after the experience. |
| Achieving Parental Trust and Love | The result in which the participant aimed at accomplishing their parents trust and love during or after the event. This would also include the instances where the executive would do the task for compliments and affection from their parent. |
| Confusion | The result in which the participant experienced mass confusion with their identity or what they wanted other than what their guardians wanted, as well as the path to their future being unknown. |

A summary of the narrative interviews will be shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Summary of Interviews

| Participant # | The Key Events from Interview | Relevant Theme/s |
|---------------|--|---|
| 1 | After their mothers' concern with their bad performance in a math quiz, although they would overthink and stress about the doubts, they managed to pass the class in aims to lessen their mother's concern. | Mental Health Issues Achieving Parental Trust and Love |
| 2 | Had a shyness problem, couldn't greet cousins leading to their parents and brothers' discomfort and would force themselves to go out despite being uneasy about it. | Mental Health Issues |
| 3 | Failed a couple of subjects and made their parents frustrated. That made them feel at fault and embarrassed and ended up pushing themselves as well as stressing about little things. | Mental Health Issues |
| 4 | Suffered from a reading and writing problem, would get bed grades at writing exams. Got better in order to gain their parents trust and have faith in them. | Achieving Parental Trust and Love |
| 5 | Got low marks in elementary school, parents limited their distractions like arts which was their favourite class. Ended up being confused in how the future will turn out. | Confusion |
| 6 | Spent their entire life trying to get their parents approval by doing things they are not actually enjoying. Resulted in not having any real talents and without ambition for anything. Had an identity crisis. | Confusion |
| 7 | Used to get low marks at school. Got better because of their mother dreaming of how bright their future would be, they wanted to make her happy. | Achieving Parental Trust and Love |

iii. Common theme 1: Mental Health Issues

When asked about the after-effects of constantly trying to meet parental high expectations, three out of the seven interviewees gave credit to experiencing stress and anxiety mostly and associating it with how their parents would react to their achievements. They also assured that some of the tasks they were given to fulfil were beyond their capabilities which is why they might have to go through a stressful time trying to achieve those tasks.

“Sometimes, I would force myself to go out even though I wasn’t so comfortable, but I did it because my parents and brothers didn’t like how I was shy and thought it was very rude, so I got more stressed about it.”

Often, the subject of the expectations was about academic attainment, as participants 1, 3 and 4 explained, when they first saw how their parents reacted to them performing badly in school or in certain subjects, it resulted in them feeling distressed and at fault.

“That day, I came home from school with my grade card, and I failed a couple of subjects, that made my parents really frustrated and my mom started teaching me from that day on. I will say I got better grades after that, but it was a really bad experience, I felt so embarrassed and cried a lot. I think it was the first time I that I started to get stressed about every little thing, yeah.”

iv. Common theme 2: Achieving Parental Trust and Love

Two out of seven of the participants, numbers 4 and 7, mentioned mostly about how gaining trust was the result of achieving for their parents. Precisely, they made it clear how parental approval was the driving mechanism for them to keep going and achieving high. Interviewee 1 also could also fall under the theme of achieving parental trust and love as they mentioned how decreasing their parents concern was a goal they wanted to achieve at the time when they were asked about why they seemed to meet up with those expectations, and similarly to participants 4 and 7 it was what drove them to do so.

“Yes, because I was just a kid who liked to do whatever my mom said to make her less concerned. But truthfully, it would be really taunting whenever I don’t do well enough, and I would get anxious and overthink everything.”

Executive 4 explained how since they were the eldest out of their siblings, they felt like they had a responsibility towards their family. Subsequently, wanting to make their parents to look up to them and have faith in them is a reasonable explanation. Both executives, 4 and 7, concentrated on “faith” and “happiness” out of all the reasons on why they condemned to their parents’ expectations. Which is as participant 7 responded with when they were asked on the reason as well.

“Yeah, as I said, I wanted to make my mother happy and see that future come true.”

v. Common theme 3: Confusion

Another ratio of two out of seven participants, 5 and 6, explained how all of the hard work they undergo only led them to grow confused. The confusion they shared was divided into two types, either with which life path they wanted to willingly follow or their special talents. When asked about what type of expectation they felt pressured to condemn to, participant 5 explained how scoring below average in most of the classes was an enough reason for their first ever parental task. They were taught to lessen daily distractions each day to provide more time for studying. An important note they mentioned was their love for art class at the time, which didn’t seem to matter to their guardians as it was not an academic class, or that art students “don’t have a future” as the stereotype suggests. Growing up, they have been fearful of their future and have developed massive hate towards the academic subjects their parents saw benefits in.

As for the second type of confusion, a complimentary experience was that of executive 6. Specially when they were asked how they think those expectations effect children, whether they were bad or not.

“I think children will mostly be affected negatively from them; I have spent my entire life working on things I don’t like just because my mother thought it will have future benefits so now, I don’t think I’m actually ambitious about anything. I think, if I was given a chance to do whatever I liked before I would have many talents now.”

vi. Limitations

Upon doing this research, it was highly important to consider the limitations that were faced. The first limitation was the lack of face-to-face interviewing. Following certain guidelines that have resulted from recent situations as well as for cultural reasons this research was to be collecting interview responses via texts and voice messages which can be of inconvenience in comparison to regular interviewing. While the responses have been collected, the in-depth responses that have been hoped for were extremely hard to come by and lasted for just a while.

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggested that a portion of the initial hypothesis was wrong. When parents go overboard with their expectations for their child, they fall out and that can be seen by the participants' responses where they feel drained and overworked. However, this study has proven that children do not seem to get noticeably worse at a certain task that they have been pressured into doing, but rather they get exactly what their parents want from them. As a result, that leads to future problems. The second hypothesis was seen to be true where parents do not tend to recognize whether their child has the capabilities to achieving according to their wants. As explained earlier, children do not have the chance to recap their own expectations for themselves, but they are bombarded by the ones their guardians have on them.

From these narratives, multiple conclusions can be drawn as well as some suggestions that may aid in future research and on the topic issue itself. Firstly, the idea of children competing in tasks they do not particularly find interesting to get their parents approval can be considered as a trigger for their relationship as it can be seen as the only way children are able to receive compliments and empathy. The initial hypothesis of children performing worse at a task after undergoing pressure, that was conceived from a previous study (Anderson, 2015), was proven to be wrong which supports the conclusion. Even though children have been through immense pressure, they still partake in those expectations to feel better about themselves, and again doing so by seeking approval.

With the proper use of the conclusions made by this study, awareness can be spread to parents. Researchers might be able to grasp these claims and use the media to portray them actively, by newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, TV commercials and many more ways the media is widely spread to most people. However, more research on how parental expectations effect children's achievements has to take place, and with the help of this research and its results.

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