

Performing under pressure

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From Theo Walcott's new fame to exams, parents hold the key to teenage success

What can it be like to be thrust on to the world stage at the age of 17? To shoulder the expectations that come from headlines screeching that you could win the World Cup for England? To know that your girlfriend is now paparazzi fodder?

It is a time of great pressure yet Theo Walcott responds calmly: "I'm excited but I'm not worried." This is telling and it is not necessarily maturity that is speaking — young achievers are often less nervous than their older peers because they don't recognise the complexities of their situation. No, what Walcott is demonstrating is confidence. We know only a few details about his background, but we do know that, like Michael Owen who was also fêted for his talent at 17, he is close to his father. This strong parental relationship is key, say psychologists, and often makes the difference between prodigies who go on to have smoothly successful careers and blameless lives, and those, such as George Best and Paul Gascoigne, who are so overwhelmed by the stresses and the demands on them that they self-destruct.

As new research indicates that parents of junior athletes can harm their children's development by being pushy — and as thousands of less high-profile 17-year-olds face exam pressure — it is pertinent to ask how adolescents can be helped to survive achievement-related stress without imploding. The psychologist Oliver James confirms that temperament matters, though it is nurture that is more significant. He defines two sets of circumstances that produce exceptional youthful achievement, the first the product of parents who set consistently high standards.

"This person has been put under pressure from a young age so that love is conditional on success. That leaves them with a compulsion to achieve, and nothing will get in the way. It's no surprise that they are the best because since the age of 3 or 4 exceptional performance has been normal. The trouble with this type of person is that they tend to be inhibited and unimaginative and rather dead emotionally: their life revolves around being a high achiever. The pushy parent is not good for your emotional life."

In an interview in *The Times* this week Michael Owen explained that his self-belief came — and still comes — from his father, notably through such childhood incidents as being urged to throw an apple core into a bin. "You would lob it and get it in the middle," Owen said. "He would not say anything but his look would be enough: 'That's my boy'. I did not want to let him down, whether it was playing badly at football or smashing a window. It was not fear of getting a clip, it was a fear of failing him."

So Owen has a father who both expects perfection and has absolute faith in his son, and lets him know that he loves him. Owen also claimed that he never feels nervous before playing because he knows that he can deliver, that he doesn't have emotional highs and lows, and that he prefers the real world to fantasy. All this confirms that he is an introvert who can defer his feelings — giving him an advantage over an outgoing, popular extrovert in a stressful situation. His ability to live without a hinterland means that he has extreme focus, enabling him to maintain his success without the destructive distractions offered by fame, James suggests.

The second type of youthful achiever, personified by George Best, is more vulnerable. "They are less hot-housed by a pushy parent, though that is always there to some degree," says James. "This is more to do with trying to deal with a weak sense of self and having difficulty feeling good about themselves. They don't feel effective and powerful and valued, and so their performance is an opportunity for self expression and that is when they feel alive.

They are compensating for feelings of worthlessness and they tend to end up in abusive situations with sex and drugs and drink because they have a bottomless pit of needs, dating to their infancy, which they have to fill. Getting the acclaim of others, feeling power over an

opponent, is part of this.”

There is a third type, James suggests, exemplified by the well-balanced Thierry Henry, but rare among youthful high achievers. This person has a strong, stable and loving relationship with their parents, but is not driven by them towards perfectionism. “He is not trying to prove anything,” says James. “He is not trying to compensate for bits that are missing inside him; he’s doing what he does because he’s a true artist. His relationship with his parents is not one in which only success is rewarded, the emphasis is that his best is good enough.”

This is the template the psychologist Dorothy Rowe recommends to parents of 17-year-olds facing exams. She believes that communication is the key to fostering confident adolescents who can cope with stress.

“What happens with a lot of young people who are thrust into the limelight is that they haven’t got a point of reference to compare themselves with and they find other role models who aren’t substantial. How you cope with stress at this age depends on having someone you can talk to about what happened, and that person accepting what you say without loading you with advice or criticism. If you’ve got somebody like that in your life, who asks you to do your best, you have a point of reference.”

This involves balance, Rowe says. The parent who encourages a child to achieve without demanding constant perfection is getting that balance right, while the parent who either pushes for perfection or praises indiscriminately is less likely to help their child to cope with a situation in which they lack control.

“Young people facing exams have little control because they don’t know what’s going to be on the exam paper and so the parents need to understand how the child approaches study, how they learn best.

“Parents often clash with their children over this, but they should facilitate the way their child chooses. They might be a lark, getting up early in the morning, or an owl, studying late at night — you shouldn’t harass them because they’re different from you. Parents should also be careful about how they praise and how often, because if they praise everything the praise is devalued. They should praise their children when they have done something that requires an effort. Don’t praise just for tidying their room, just give positive reinforcement by noticing.

“Parents who give their children undiluted love and positive regard may find their children don’t try, or only when they’re being observed because they are not self motivated.

“Michael Owen internalised his dad, wanted to please him, and got his motivation from that. He got a moral sense of what he should do and the same thing will apply to Theo Walcott — he will have some kind of central guidance from his father. When you’re in a situation where you get excessive adulation and money, those who have some kind of moral compass are the ones who come through the experience without falling apart.”

This is relevant to all parents, Rowe suggests, and she approves of “life-affirming” statements that show a parent’s love for his or her child and points out that even failure can be met with the idea that they will do better next time, rather than reinforcing the crushing sense of defeat.

“Stress is an abstract term. When you’re in a situation you haven’t encountered before and you think it’s challenging, this isn’t stress. If your attitude is that it will defeat you, that’s stress. If you are self confident you’re saying, ‘I’ve dealt with difficult things in the past, I can deal with this now’. It’s difficult for parents, but if their children understand that they will be self-confident young people.”

Oliver James is the author of *They F*** You Up: How to Survive Family Life*, (Bloomsbury, £7.99)

'There comes a time when parents move into the background'

Natalie Clein won the BBC Young Musician of the Year prize when she was 17 in 1994. Now an acclaimed and established cellist, she believes that the parents of talented children should tread a "fine line" to support their children.

"I was lucky to have a lot of support from my parents without the uncontrollable feeling that I had to succeed in an outward sense. At 17 people were talking about me as though I'd reached a level I knew I hadn't reached. It's not particularly healthy, that level of expectation, and in order to improve you have to become more yourself.

"My parents helped me a lot but there comes a moment when they naturally move into the background and you have to start being self-reliant. If you haven't built up adult defences by then you're going to come unstuck.

"I think how you cope with prominence at 17 depends on the level of passion you have for the field your talent is in. I still have the same amount of passion for my art that I had at 16, and that's my driving force."

Food for testing times

- Start the day with a high-protein or high-fibre breakfast, such as eggs, beans or mushrooms on toast, or a wholegrain cereal such as porridge, muesli or Weetabix.
- Follow up later in the day with more high-protein foods such as beans, meat, fish, eggs or cheese, plus vegetables and fruit.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Avoid fizzy drinks.
- Avoid caffeine, or at least go easy on it.
- Avoid chocolate and other foods high in sugar.
- If you want to snack, eat fresh or dried fruits, or unsalted nuts.
- Pasta, rice, potatoes and bread at night can promote sleep. Go to bed before midnight, and get some exercise in between swotting sessions.