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Parents Seek Psych-help for Admission Stress

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Illustration: Tapas Ranjan

BENGALURU: Parents of three- and four-year-olds are under a lot of stress this season, as they are busy choosing their ward's first school.

A lot of research goes into the process as they consult neighbours and friends, and meticulously follow online reviews of the institutions.

The stress is getting to some, prompting them to consult psychologists about it. "During admission time, many parents come to

us for help," says Kala Balasubramanian, counselling psychologist at Inner Dawn Counselling. "Even at the pre-KG level, they want their children to get the best education."

Many families today live in apartment complexes, where they face peer pressure. "Where are others' children studying?" is a constant source of anxiety.

Bina Kurup, mother of two daughters, remembers a breakdown her friend had.

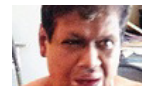
"She was researching for a school and kept getting good and bad reviews of six schools they were considering. She got so much feedback that she could not process it, and nearly had a nervous breakdown."

She had started calling strangers to get more information on the schools. "It was getting a bit scary," says Bina.

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Bina's friend went for four or five sessions with a counsellor, over a month. Her husband, who had let his wife handle the admission process, stepped in.

"He told her that this is it, we are deciding on this school, and this is not the end of the world," Bina recalls.

Bina's friend was dealing with pressure at work too. "It was like straddling two racing horses. Somewhere you just crack."

Parents, who are mostly in their late twenties and early thirties, have to factor in many things — fee structure, curriculum, the curricular and extra-curricular record of the school, distance from home and last but, not the least, the prestige associated with the institution.

Discussion threads online instruct parents to think way ahead — whether their kindergarten going toddler would like to be an engineer or do an MBA — and decide on their first school based on that.

The stress even manifests in the body, says Kala. Headaches, shoulder and back aches, and tension-related psychosomatic symptoms are common.

"Picking the first school can cause friction between couples also," she says.

Earlier parents did not obsess over the quality of education. They picked schools that were closest from home, says Gracy

Jebastina, psychological counsellor at Sukrut. But, in the last three or four years, the focus has shifted to a fuzzy idea of the "best education".

Gracy has not done individual consultations for parents dealing with admission stress, but this anxiety often comes up in parenting workshops.

"Waiting in long queues, choosing the right curriculum, their neighbours' choices, everything is taken into account," she says. "First parents worry about the infrastructure the school provides, and then they worry about their child's safety and happiness while at school."

Children are naturally curious, which helps learning. But their "sense of wonder" for their surroundings can lead to hours of anxiety for parents.

"During admission, three- and four-year-olds tend to get distracted by colourful or new things in the school room," says Gracy. Parents, instead of appreciating this, are praying that their child is focused on the questions she is asked.

"During an informal conversation, a day-care centre in-charge told me that they are training children to be focused," says Gracy. "This is not acceptable. We are curbing the learning process which should tap into the child's curiosity."

Tips

- Plan and prepare for the admission process
- The non-working partner often has to shoulder the entire responsibility. Instead, couples should decide at which point each one has to step in.
- Negotiate with schools to make the admission process simpler and more transparent.
- You could transfer your anxiety to your child. Try to stay calm.
- Keep your expectations realistic.
- Keep your child as the focus of your planning process. You are more likely to consider other factors rather than a particular school.

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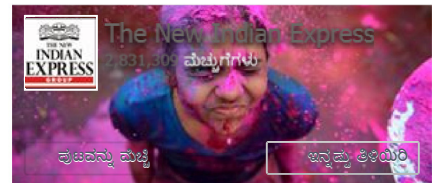
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