

# ARE SCHOOLS TOO COMPETITIVE?

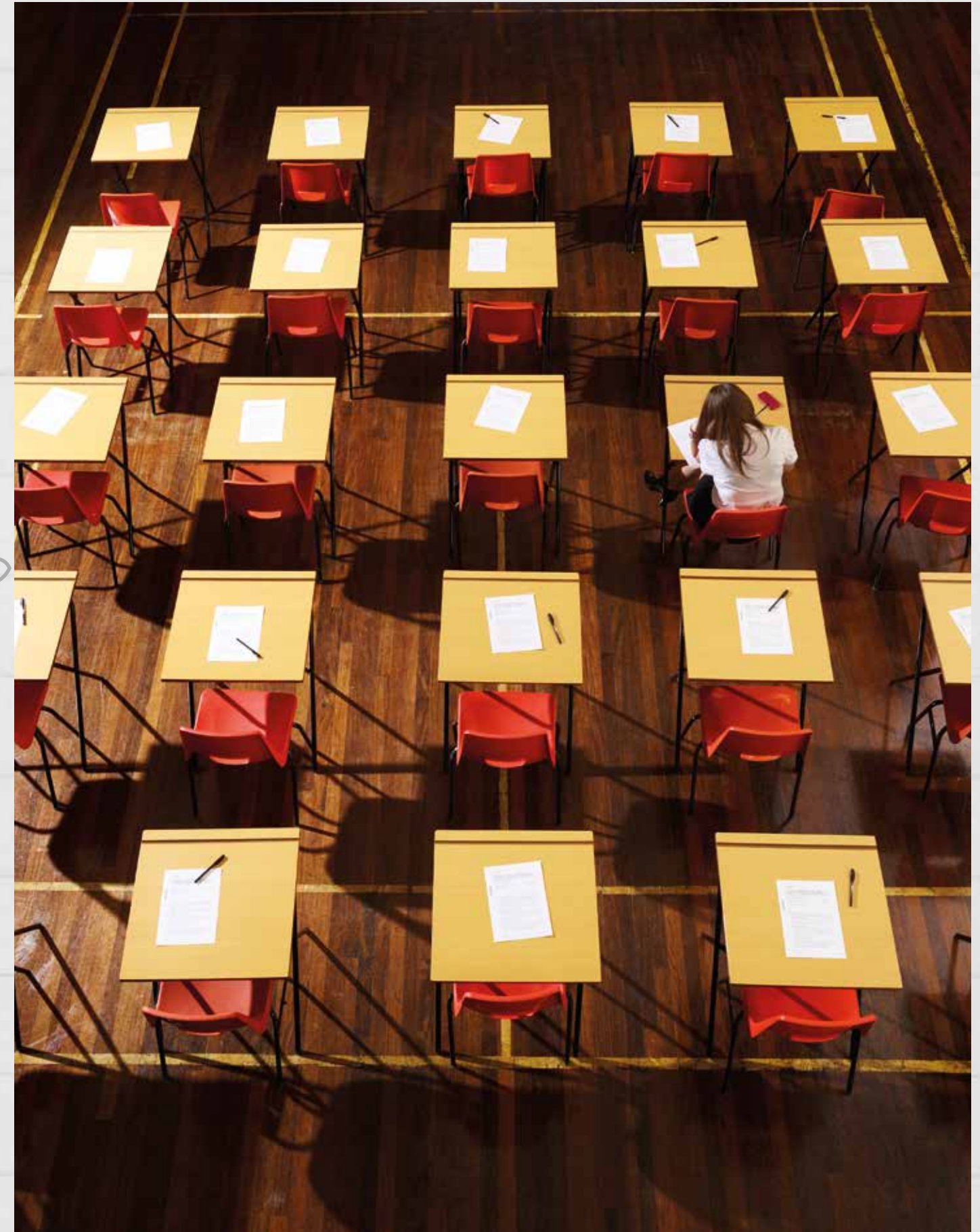
*A bit of HEALTHY competition is all well and good, but are we taking things too far in putting children under PRESSURE?*

WORDS by ELAINE HALLIGAN

**E**ven before your babe is born, the conversation from coffee mornings to dinner parties becomes almost obsessively preoccupied with the topic of the best nurseries, the top schools, and for many parents this can be a source of much stress. The competitive atmosphere breeds virulently, with parents feeling the pressure to get places at the 'right' schools. This, together with a results-oriented educational environment, can create conditions where children are not happy and passionate about learning, and are showing increasingly early signs of anxiety.

The reality is, the pressure to ensure your child is a 'success' results in many parents subjecting their families to the tyranny of league tables, moving house to be in the right catchment area and even joining the Sunday morning stampede to Mass or Morning Prayer to satisfy the requirements for faith schools. Despite the planning, parents may be thwarted at the last hurdle when their local state school has no places in the reception year, due to the sibling policy. The whole process is enough to turn you grey early.

The Children's Society Good Childhood report 2015 revealed that in an international comparison of children's happiness in 15 countries, children in England were unhappier than their peers in 11 other countries, including Ethiopia and Algeria. Stress and pressure at school were listed as some of the contributing



Photographs: Getty

Success

factors. So is it that our schools are overly competitive or do parents create this feeling unwittingly? And what does this mean for you if you are in the process of selecting a school for your child?

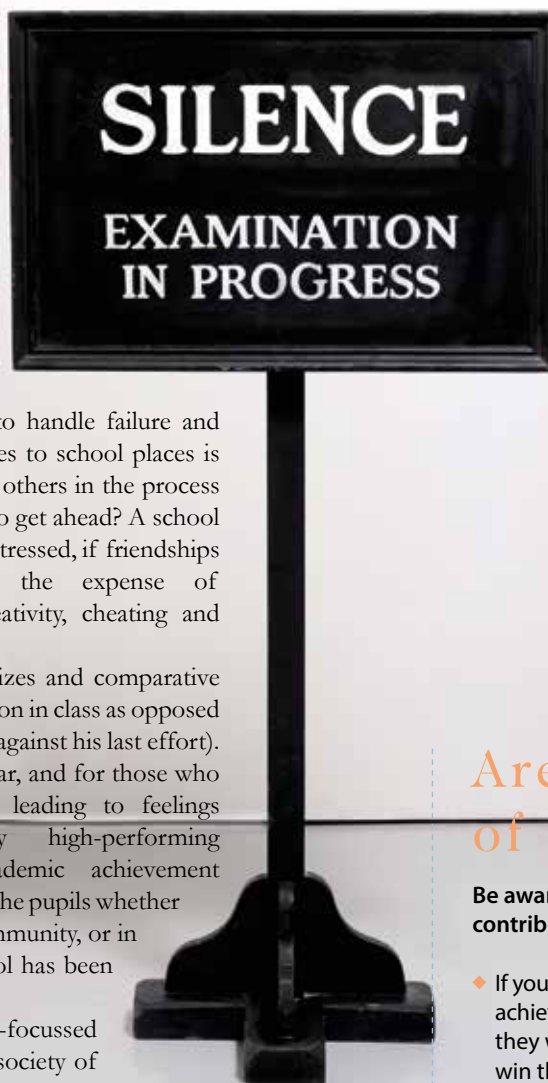
The first thing to remember is the importance of matching your child's individual needs to an educational environment suited to them. All too often we choose a school based on its reputation and standing as opposed to matching it to our child's needs. This is hard, as many of us may not fully understand our child's temperament and strengths and weaknesses – personal or academic. It also assumes you have a choice and that, in reality, is often restricted.

If you find your child is struggling, there may be too much pressure and too little support. If your child is academically able, has good work habits and is organised, the environment may be right for him, even if it is deemed competitive.

Competition can be healthy – as long as it encourages children to do their best, how to handle failure and strive to improve. Competition when it comes to school places is fine, as long as you don't devalue yourself or others in the process – what are they/you prepared to do in order to get ahead? A school may be too competitive if many students feel stressed, if friendships suffer because of getting ahead at the expense of others, if there is low-risk taking and creativity, cheating and lack of enjoyment of learning.

Be aware of the impact on children of prizes and comparative grades (where your child is ranked by his position in class as opposed to his performance in its own right, measured against his last effort). Prizes often go to the same children every year, and for those who never receive one, there is no incentive, leading to feelings of hopelessness. There are many high-performing schools that have no prizes for academic achievement – instead, they recognise the achievements of the pupils whether they be in sport, in the arts, or the school community, or in contribution to the charitable work the school has been involved with.

The bottom line is that excessively exam-focussed schools and parents will not contribute to a society of successful and happy, brain-healthy children. I know what I want... do you?



“ Prizes often go to the same children every year, and for those who never receive one, there is no incentive

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## Are parents part of the problem?

Be aware how we parents unwittingly contribute towards competitiveness:

- ◆ If you only focus on and praise their achievements, your child will feel that they will disappoint you if they don't win the race/get voted as class captain. The child who gets 7/10 in a spelling test and is afraid to report back to his parents, views himself negatively.
- ◆ Focus on attitude and effort, and the strategies children are using, for example: "I noticed you were saying your times tables over and over to yourself. That is a good habit as it will help you to remember them."
- ◆ Allow your children to make mistakes and learn from not getting things right first time. The perils of perfectionism can heighten a competitive spirit.
- ◆ Let your kids have time to relax – they don't always need to be doing 'enriching' activities.



ELAINE HALLIGAN IS DIRECTOR OF THE PARENT PRACTICE IN LONDON. THEIR LATEST BOOK, *REAL PARENTING FOR REAL KIDS* IS AVAILABLE NOW. FOR MORE INFO AND ADVICE ON HOW TO BRING OUT THE BEST IN YOUR CHILDREN, VISIT [theparentpractice.com](http://theparentpractice.com)