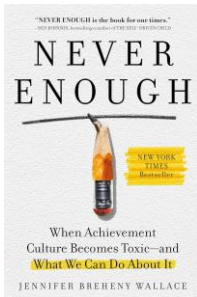


# 'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.



February 2024  
**Never Enough**  
By Jennifer Breheny Wallace

## Discussion Highlights

*Presented by Brenda Martineau*

### **Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic – and What We Can Do About It** by Jennifer Breheny Wallace (award-winning journalist and mother of three)

Past decades have given rise to a “professionalized childhood” where every minute of a child’s life is managed to maximize their potential. Excessive pressure to achieve comes at a cost to the child’s health.

Jennifer Wallace’s 2020 research focused on diverse, college educated families who get to choose where they live and where their kids go to school (n=200). She was shocked by the result that kids believe their worth is based on their performance and that they only “matter” if they are successful.

#### **Chapter One: Why Are Our Kids “at Risk”? Life in the Pressure Cooker**

Since the late 90’s scientists have discovered that what places a child “at risk” is growing up in an environment of unrelenting pressure (poverty, trauma, discrimination, excessive pressure to excel).

Parents, coaches, and administrators feel a duty to ensure children live up to their potential. The child becomes the investment which impacts the brand (family, community, school).

#### **Chapter Two: Name it to Tame It – Roots of Parental Anxiety**

Parents are going to extremes and costs keep escalating and admissions rates are declining creating scarcity. High achievement is seen as a life raft in an uncertain future. Education has become a “positional good” if you have it, you have status, which provides even more advantages.

Children are feeling like commodities. Their lives become high budget productions, not unique and imperfect stories just beginning to unfold at a formative, vulnerable time.

#### **Chapter 3: The Power of Mattering**

A tyranny of metrics, tracking and sorting can gradually overtake a young person's existence inside and outside school starting in middle school. In high school, the bar for what is exceptional keeps rising as does the pressure. Kids now are also clocking their measure in social media metrics. Parents are reacting anxiously to a hypercompetitive world with even higher expectations causing their kids to wrongfully perceive their value as contingent on achievement.

Mattering expresses the deep need we have to feel seen, be cared for and understood by those around us. According to Gordon Flett, in his book The Psychology of Mattering there are 7 critical ingredients:

1. Attention: being noticed by others
2. Importance: feeling like you're significant
3. Dependence: others rely on you
4. Ego extension: people care what happens to you
5. Noted absence: feeling like you are missed
6. Appreciation: feeling like you and your actions are valued
7. Individuation: made to feel unique, special and your true self

Parents can get curious and focus on work habits not grades, do more things together, display warmth and unconditional acceptance, communicate how the kids matter, and get to know them better.

#### **Chapter 4: You First – Your Child's Mattering Rests on Your Own (Mattering)**

Modeling is important for parents: Do they behave as if their worth is unconditional? Do they practice self-kindness? Do they act as if their interests are as important as other's?

To be a good parent today is to be an all-consumed parent. Despite strides in gender equality, mothers still bear the most weight, and parents no longer have the support of an extended network. Intensive parenting is a style that puts children's needs at the front and center of family life and demands an excessive amount of sacrifice, that most likely leads to the parents' needs being unmet.

Friendship can buffer against the day-to-day stress. Social support short circuits our body's natural threat response. Two practices have helped parents strengthen friendships: 1/Put your friends on your calendar and 2/Practice the willingness to be vulnerable (how do we normalize asking for help?)

#### **Chapter 5: Taking the Kettle Off the Heat – Confronting the Grind Culture**

Growing up in "super zip" communities-- 650 places in the US where 2/3 of households have college degrees and make \$120k and where people have similar ideas about achievement-- can ratchet up the pressure on children to replicate high status and possessions. Psychologists and researchers agree the one thing today making young people more vulnerable than past generations is the increasingly narrow definition of "success" and the pressure and competition to keep up.

The idea of a growth mindset, where a person's talent and ability can grow with effort, can backfire as teachers, parents and kids seek perfection. This can be a precursor to workaholism later in life. Extrinsic values centered around personal achievement and focused on other people's opinion, outside attention, approval and rewards can crowd out intrinsic values centered around personal growth and improving the community and relationships yet the latter have been found to sustain happiness.

At the root of "grind culture" is the foundational belief that a "good" life is secured by admission to a "good" college, which is key to financial success, social status, and happiness. Research comparing life outcomes

between grads from large public universities and expensive private schools saw no significant statistical difference in the outcomes of satisfaction with family life, economic well-being, and jobs. Other research showed six types of college experiences with an outsized impact on future success:

1. Taking a course with a professor who made learning exciting
2. Having a professor who cared about the student personally
3. Having a mentor who encouraged the student to pursue personal goals
4. Working on a meaningful project across semesters
5. Participating in an internship
6. Being active in extracurricular activities

Parents can influence the conversation by emphasizing not WHERE you go to college but WHAT you do when you get there. Stress intrinsic values at home.

Adults have a role as balance keepers: humans are worthy of rest and nurturing – we are not machines. Family connectedness is the first line of protection in mental health and wellbeing, then friends (at least one good one), feeding each other's sense of mattering. Parents can model vulnerability and emphasize the importance of close friendships and teach kids that they are worthy of connection and that it is safe to rely on others and serve as source of support for their friends.

Competitive environments can be especially isolating for diverse students, who may feel they have to work even harder to prove themselves worthy. The more competitive students are encouraged to be, the more likely they are to experience scarcity and envy which can fuel dehumanizing attitudes and stereotypes. Envy can lead to reflection – who are we and what do we really want out of life?

We can use envy as a motivator to raise ourselves up not to cut others down, emphasizing the person you are becoming and the importance of relationships. An adaptive competitive style is associated with high self-esteem and being concerned about the wellbeing of others. Competition and friendship don't have to be at odds. Model being a worthy rival. Play to win while encouraging effort.

### **Chapter 7: Greater Expectations: Adding Value to the World Protects Them**

An unintended consequence of intensive parenting is that it promotes a narrow self-focus in children. Research shows that young people are shifting away from social values and community to self-enhancing ones like pursuing money, fame and image--there is a narcissism epidemic. Children need a larger sense of purpose. Meaningless is the problem, more than stress.

Helping kids make a connection to the greater good will bring them joy. When students not only learn about social issues but get involved, this engagement helps them understand a larger purpose.

In William Damon's book The Path to Purpose he offers guidance for helping adolescents find their purpose to include listening deliberately, asking guiding questions, being open to interests, encourage responsibility and involvement in chores, and connect them with possible mentors.

Other strategies include encouraging deeper connection and building capacity for setbacks and failure. When we teach kids how to live a life of purpose and how to contribute meaningfully to others, their drive becomes self-sustaining. Purpose energizes, motivates and keeps them on track, even when challenges or setbacks happen. It curbs perfectionist tendencies and reminds them they're much more than any one failure. The larger purpose shifts the place we see ourselves in the world from one of scarcity and fear to one of abundance where we are part of a bigger whole. Your life becomes more meaningful when you know the

value you can bring to others, and the more you are able to add value to others, the more meaningful your life becomes.

### **Chapter 8: The Ripple Effect: Unlocking Mattering All Around You**

Knowing that you are inherently valuable and that you add value to the world, spreads like a ripple effect. Beneath the illusion of scarcity, beneath the fear and anxiety and envy and status seeking, we are all striving for the same basic human needs: to feel valued, to belong, to be known and loved for who we are at our core.

Mattering offers a powerful antidote to a scarcity mindset, also telling us that we're not meant to do this alone. A larger network is protective. Knowing that people are valuable for who they are and not how they perform, what they produce or acquire releases us from the competitive chokehold, connecting us to the best in ourselves and others.

In the end, we all really want the same thing for our kids—we want them to live a good life, to have deep life-sustaining connections, to feel the joy of living a life of meaning and to leave this world a little better. We want them to feel valued and to help others and feel valued as well. We want them to live a life that matters.

**About the Book Club** In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there's no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, [click here](#).