

PRO TIPS

for media advisers

Comments from Jack Kennedy

By mollycoddling our children, we're fueling mental illness in teenagers

Of course we want to keep children safe. But exposure to normal stresses and strains is vital for their future wellbeing

by Jonathan Haidt and Pamela Paresky / Jan. 10, 2019 / *The Guardian*

If nothing else, this opinion piece from *The Guardian*, now nearly a year old, can serve as a "discussion starter," or as a model for a persuasive writing unit.

Teaching effective analogy use in arguments is important but difficult. Analogies, much like similes and metaphors, are never an exact match, but can provide ways to expand arguments and show connections that readers had not considered.

Concessions, or counter-arguments demonstrate the writer's depth of thinking as well as consideration of potential opposition.

At the hear of this argument is the definition of "normal stress." Agreeing on the basic terms of a debate is essential in reaching conclusions.

Establishing ethos is key any writer, and our young writers often have not established themselves as experts in a field. But solid research, interviewing and observation can overcome the lack of "expert credentials."

We talk incessantly about how to make children more "resilient," but whatever we're doing, it's not working. Rates of anxiety disorders and depression are rising rapidly among teenagers, and in the U.S., universities can't hire therapists fast enough to keep up with the demand. What are we doing wrong?

Nassim Taleb invented the word "anti-fragile" and used it in his book by the same name to describe a small but very important class of systems that gain from shocks, challenges, and disorder. Bones and the banking system are two examples; both get weaker – and more prone to catastrophic failure – if they go for a long time without any stressors and then face a major challenge. The immune system is an even better example: it requires exposure to certain kinds of germs and potential allergens in childhood in order to develop to its full capacity. Parents who treat their children as if they are fragile (for example, by keeping them away from dirt and potential allergens, such as peanuts) are depriving their children's immature immune systems of the learning experiences those systems need to develop their maximum protective capacity.

Children's social and emotional abilities are as anti-fragile as their immune systems. If we overprotect kids and keep them "safe" from unpleasant social situations and negative emotions, we deprive them of the challenges and opportunities for skill-building they need to grow strong. Such children are likely to suffer more when exposed later to other unpleasant but ordinary life events, such as teasing and social exclusion.

Some caveats are needed: kids need friends and a loving and reliable attachment figure. Children raised with high levels of fear in unpredictable or violent environments experience elevated levels of stress hormones for extended periods of time. Such long-term exposure can permanently alter brain development and increase stress reactivity, with lifelong ramifications for mental and physical health.

But brief periods of normal stress are not harmful; they are essential. A 2013 review of stress research titled "Understanding resilience" made the analogy to the immune system explicit: "Stress inoculation is a form of immunity against later stressors, much in the same way that vaccines induce immunity against disease." What, then, would happen if we suddenly stopped immunizing children with this kind of stress?

We recently co-wrote a book, with Greg Lukianoff, titled *The Coddling of the American Mind*, about the culture that erupted on American university campuses around 2014, and has spread to some campuses in the UK and Canada. In the book we describe how they began using the language of safety and danger to describe ideas and speakers, and to demand policies based on the premise that some students are fragile (or "vulnerable"). Terms such as "safe space," "trigger warning," and "micro-aggression" entered the language. These, we believe, are requests made by a generation that was deprived of the necessary quantity of social immunizations. Students now react with a kind of emotional allergic response (often referred to as being "triggered") to things that previous generations would have either brushed off or argued against.

It's not the kids' fault. In the UK, as in the US, parents became much more fearful in the 1980s and 1990s as cable TV and later the Internet exposed everyone, more and more, to those rare

occurrences of brutal crimes and freak accidents that, as we report in our book, now occur less and less. Outdoor play and independent mobility went down; screen time and adult-supervised activities went up.

Yet free play in which kids work out their own rules of engagement, take small risks, and learn to master small dangers (such as having a snowball fight) turns out to be crucial for the development of adult social and even physical competence. Depriving them of free play stunts their social-emotional growth. Norwegian play researchers Ellen Sandseter and Leif Kennair wrote about the “anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences.” They noted that children spontaneously seek to add risk to their play, which then extends their coping abilities, which then empowers them to take on even greater challenges. They warned: “We may observe an increased neuroticism or psychopathology in society if children are hindered from partaking in age adequate risky play.” They wrote those words in 2011. Over the following few years, their prediction came true.

Mental health statistics in the US and UK tell the same awful story: kids born after 1994 – now known as “iGen” or “Gen-Z” – are suffering from much higher rates of anxiety disorders and depression than did the previous generation (millennials), born between 1982 and 1994.

The upward trends for depression among teenage boys and girls are happening in the UK too. Yearly measures of major depression are not available in the UK, but the NHS reports extensive mental health statistics for England from 2004 and 2017 that allow us to make a direct comparison for the same time period. Using a stricter criterion, which finds lower overall rates, the pattern is similar: up slightly for boys, nearly double for girls.

This alarming rise does not just reflect an increase in teenagers’ willingness to talk about mental health; it is showing up in their behavior too, particularly in the rising rates at which teenage girls are admitted to hospital for deliberately harming themselves, mostly by intentionally cutting themselves. Large studies in the US and UK using data through to 2014 show sharply rising curves in the years after 2009, with increases of more than 60% in both countries. A 2017 Guardian study of more recent NHS data found a 68% rise in hospital admissions for self-harm by English teenage girls, over the previous decade.

Even more tragically, we also see this trend in the rate of teenage suicide, which is rising for both sexes in the US and the UK. The suicide rate is up 34% for teenage boys in the US (in 2016, compared with the average rate from 2006-2010). For girls, it is up an astonishing 82%. In the UK, the corresponding increase for teenage boys through to 2017 is 17%, while the increase for girls is 46%. Nobody knows for certain why recent years have seen so much more of a change for girls than boys, but the leading explanation is the arrival of smartphones and social media. Girls use social media more than boys, and they seem to be more affected by the chronic social comparison, focus on physical appearance, awareness of being left out, and social or relational aggression that social media facilitates.

What can we do to reverse these trends? How can we raise kids strong enough to handle the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of life? There’s a powerful piece of folk wisdom: prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child. As soon as you grasp the concept of antifragility, you understand why *that folk saying is true*.

Of course, we should work to make life safer by removing physical dangers from the environment, such as drunk drivers and pedophiles. And of course we should teach children to treat each other with kindness and respect. But we also have to let our kids out to roam the road without us. It’s what most of us over the age of 40 did (even in much more crime-prone decades) and it’s what most kids want to do. At first, it’s scary for parents to let go. But when a seven-year-old jumps up and down with excitement and pride after running an errand on her own, it gets easier to let her go and play in a nearby park with her friends – where they all learn to look out for each other and

The heart of this argument depends on drawing conclusions from published research and available government statistics.

The Guardian is a British publication, which accounts for the references to UK studies, but the article includes enough U.S. research to provide the logos a persuasive argument needs.

The continuing surge in teen suicide in Colorado is established fact, though schools seem to be struggling to find practical solutions. Individual students are not trends, of course, and each tragic suicide contains its own complex story. Our hope is that student media can share preventive coverage and each school program has to find its own strategy.

Correlation does not equal causation. This is among the most important truths of logic that we can teach. Some experts suggest that teaching our students to write well-reasoned cause and effect essays is the most powerful tool we can give them.

As mentioned before with “normal stress,” the conclusion of this argument includes the phrase “we should let go.” Our discussion needs to be on what “letting go” means in practice.

settle their own disputes.

We can't guarantee that giving primary school children more independence today will bring down the rate of teenage suicide tomorrow. The links between childhood overprotection and teenage mental illness are suggestive but not definitive, and there are other likely causal threads. Yet there are good reasons to suspect that by depriving our innately anti-fragile kids of the wide range of experiences they need to become strong, we are systematically stunting their growth. We should let go – and let them grow.

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There is some level of risk in students getting realistic experience in media and in being thoughtful American citizens.

Schools should support and encourage student media and its role as a sounding board for ideas and a space for differing, even provocative, ideas.

Schools that tightly constrain student expression do not eliminate that expression – it all goes somewhere, likely social media – but lose the chance to educate students about everything from logic to ethical decision making.

No school desires a single teen suicide and no school is entirely to blame when such a tragedy occurs. But those tragedies do occur. Are occurring.

Establishing a strong student media program that values strong reporting and student leadership is a risk, certainly. So is offering AP courses. Some students will not “pass.”

Is the risk of embarrassment (for adults, for the school) too much for us?

Living with risk in student media programs

A constant tension within our high schools is between the strong desire to keep children safe and secure and the competing need to prepare them for the future, in further education and careers and for more generally being good citizens of a democracy.

Student media lies at the intersection of those two sources of tension and advisers of student media must constantly balance those tensions. That is the key to not only adviser “burnout” – the average tenure for a new media adviser is under three years, according to many estimates – but to dedicated education leaders, from principals to school board members, sometimes acting in ways that are anything BUT democratic.

A principal who insists on reading over all articles in the student magazine prior to publication is demonstrating a lack of trust in the students and the adviser. This is called prior review, and it is not prohibited by the Colorado Student Freedom of Expression law.

What IS prohibited is prior restraint, which most would simply call censorship. That happens rarely, though it does happen. What happens regularly, unfortunately, is a school climate that is a bit suspicious, vaguely threatening, and not confident in the decision making of students and even faculty.

Do students make bad decisions? Of course. But is the mere possibility of a bad decision enough to improperly limit student expression?

Let's turn to another analogy – not perfect, but instructive – to find our answer.

Many football teams do not enjoy success in a particular season. Some of this may be due to a lack of athletes or a lack of skilled coaching or even a lack of community support. It is difficult to determine the exact causes (though the final record is a quite clear “effect”). Coaches can be removed and new facilities can be built. New leadership can result in better records.

But imagine a principal insisting that offensive plays be approved prior to each snap of the ball, or that even the general offensive strategy be approved. Sounds silly, doesn't it?

Football functions under an extensive system of state and national standards and rules, developed to insure fairness and make the game as safe as it can be (it certainly still brings risk, but we have decided that it is the “right” amount of risk).

Prior review does not exist in football. Students are allowed to fail (lose games, make fumbles, block the wrong guy) but the program is not simply ended. Everyone recognizes that even in losing, teams learn and progress. Individual athletes can shine even in defeat and even those third-team offensive linemen are part of something larger than themselves and are valued.

Student media can be treated at least as well as football, don't you think?