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Are We Raising a Nation of Wimps?

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Marano begins her article with a portrait of cushioned childhood. "Maybe it's the cyclist in the park, trim under his sleek metallic blue helmet, cruising along the dirt path . . . at three miles an hour. On his tricycle." From there, Marano moves to cite the "all-rubber-cushioned surface where kids use to skin their knees," and the fact that the kids aren't even allowed to play alone. Their mommies and daddies are playing with them, making sure that the little darlings don't experience even the slightest scrape, scratch, or scare. "Few take it half-easy on the perimeter benches, as parents used to do," Marano explains, "letting the kids figure things out for themselves."

To the contrary, today's parents are now spending a great deal of their time doing little more than protecting their children from life. Marano describes this as "the wholly sanitized childhood, without skinned knees or the occasional C in history." The result of all this? Our kids are growing up to be pampered wimps who are incapable of assuming adult responsibility and have no idea how to handle the routine challenges of life.

David Elkind, a prominent child psychologist, counters, "Kids need to feel badly sometimes. We learn through experience and we learn through bad experiences. Through failure we learn how to cope."

That seems to be a foreign concept to many of today's parents. Coddled by a generation of Baby Boomers, today's parents have turned into hyper-protectors. Kids are not allowed to play, because they might get hurt. In today's highly competitive environment, kids have to excel at everything, even if parents have to actually do the work or negotiate an assisted success. The routine play of childhood—even the pointless chatter, nonsense, and aimless play of children—is now considered wasted time or worse. "Messing up" is simply out of style, Marano explains. "Although error and experimentation are the true mothers of success, parents are taking pains to remove failure from the equation."

"Whether we want to or not, we're on our way to creating a nation of wimps," Marano warns. She fast-forwards to college and university campuses, where "the fragility factor" is now most clearly evident. As she explains, "It's where intellectual and developmental tracks converge as the emotional training wheels come off. By all accounts, psychological distress is rampant on college campuses."

This statement is easily verified by observing the reports issued by academic institutions. Psychological distress—sometimes evident in the mild form of anxiety and, in other cases, in binge drinking, self-mutilation, and even suicide—are now major concerns of college administrators.

As Steven Hyman, Harvard University's provost and former director of the National Institute of Mental Health lamented, the problem "is interfering with the core mission of the university."

What is the source of this problem? Observers are zeroing in on parental pampering as the most critical factor behind this pattern of student “disconnect.” Smothered by parental attention and decision-making during childhood and adolescence, these young people arrive on the college campus without the ability to make their own decisions, live with their choices, learn from their experiences, and grapple with the issues of adult life.

But the academic issues do not show up only on college campuses. Today’s kids must be successful, at least in the view of their insistent parents. Even in pre-kindergarten programs, parents now show up with a list of special demands, insisting that their child must be treated with special care. Inevitably, these are often transformed into diagnoses of learning disabilities that will require special instructional accommodations. If this trend is not reversed, virtually all students will be diagnosed with some form of learning disability and the entire classroom experience will break down.

Marano blames this on parental “hyperconcern.”

John Portman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, suggests that American parents “expect their children to be perfect—the smartest, fastest, most charming people in the universe. And if they can’t get their children to prove it on their own, they’ll turn to doctors to make their kids into the people the parents want to believe their kids are.” Inevitably, what the parents are actually doing is “showing kids how to work the system for their own benefit.”

By the time these kids get to college, some parents are just getting warmed up. “Talk to a college president or administrator,” Marano advises, “and you’re almost certainly bound to hear tales of the parents who call at 2 a.m. to protest Brandon’s C in economics because it’s going to damage his shot at grad school.”

The article goes on to cite the experience of psychologist Robert Epstein of the University of California San Diego. When Epstein announced to his class that he “expected them to work hard and would hold them to high standards,” he received an outraged response from a parent—using his official judicial stationery—accusing the professor of mistreating the young.

Epstein, himself a former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*, later filed a complaint with the California Commission on Judicial Misconduct, and the judge was censured by that body for abusing his office. Nevertheless, this is just one more incident in what is becoming a normal experience on too many campuses.

How special are today’s students? Well, according to their report cards and diplomas, they are very special. The problem of “grade inflation” now means that, in terms of an actual measure of academic excellence, grades are now virtually useless. On some campuses, the average grade is approaching an A. Lawrence Summers, Harvard University’s embattled president, discovered when he assumed the university’s presidency in 2001 that 94 percent of the college’s graduates were receiving graduating honors. Peter Stearns of George Mason University argues that grade inflation “is the institutional response to parental anxiety about school demands on children.” As Marano expands, “It is a pure index of emotional over-investment in a child’s success.”

In an interesting twist, Marano focuses on one particular technology that betrays the inability of today’s children to establish their own identity and responsible decision-making—the cell phone. “Even in college—or perhaps especially at college—students are typically in contact with their parents several times a day, reporting every flicker of experience,” Marano observes.

When parents play along with this dependency, they “infantalize” their children, “keeping them in a permanent state of dependency.” Life is lived in an endless present tense, with no need to frame long-term decisions, make plans, or engage in sustained inter-personal conversations.

Who is at fault here? Marano presents this situation as rooted in bad parenting and the unwillingness of parents to allow their children to fail. Undoubtedly, this is part of the problem. Today’s parents often see their children as little trophies to be polished. Many see life as a competitive game, and they are determined to do whatever it takes to get their children on top—even if it means cutting corners, changing the rules, and even writing little Johnny’s term papers.

No doubt, Marano was on to something here. As one college student lamented to his counselor, “I wish my parents had some hobby other than me.”

David Anderegg, a professor at Bennington College, warns that parents must not try to protect their children from life. “If you have an infant and the baby has gas, burping the baby is being a good parent,” she explains. “But when you have a 10-year-old who has metaphoric gas, you don’t have to burp him. You have to let him sit with it, try to figure out what to do about it. He then learns to tolerate moderate amounts of difficulty, and it’s not the end of the world.”

Christian parents can fall into this same game, pushing our children as if worldly markers of success are to be our greatest goals and hallmarks of achievement. We must push our children toward excellence, but define excellence in biblical terms consistent with the Christian Gospel. Our concern should be that our children are raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and are pointed to God’s purpose for their life. A life spent in self-sacrificial service, on the mission field, or devoted to the cause of the Gospel will not win the plaudits of the world.

Marano’s article should serve to warn us all that we must not protect our children from the process of growing up into adulthood. While we are charged to protect our children from evil, and to guard them from harm, we are not to shield them from reality. As our children grow older, they should demonstrate an increasing maturity that allows them to deal with the problems of life—not to run from them.

Beyond this, we must expand our concern to the young people as well as their parents. Without doubt, hyperattentive parents who coddle their children are part of the problem. Nevertheless, we also face the reality of a generation that seems, in all too many cases, unwilling to grow up, assume responsibility, and become genuine adults.

Hara Estroff Marano’s article is a bracing alert addressed to today’s generation of parents. This article demands our attention, even as Christians will want to press its arguments further. Let’s be thankful for the lessons learned from skinned knees, routine disappointments, and hard work. Otherwise, we too will be raising a generation of wimps.

