Fragile Snowflakes or Manipulative Narcissists?

At the same time some students are flexing their political muscles (with the help of some professors) at the University of Missouri, Yale, and other schools demanding "safe space", we're treated to an increasing number of stories about the lack of resilience and overall fragility of many college students.

Quite honestly, the psychology of it all is fascinating, but deeply worrisome when you consider we're all in this as a society. So, what's going on?

Peter Gray, Ph.D., a research professor at Boston College, recently [wrote](#) for *Psychology Today* about the issue.

> "A year ago I received an invitation from the head of Counseling Services at a major university to join faculty and administrators for discussions about how to deal with the decline in resilience among students. At the first meeting, we learned that emergency calls to Counseling had more than doubled over the past five years. Students are increasingly seeking help for, and apparently having emotional crises over, problems of everyday life.
>
> …
>
> Two weeks ago, that head of Counseling sent us all a follow-up email, announcing a new set of meetings. His email included this sobering paragraph:
>
> > 'I have done a considerable amount of reading and research in recent months on the topic of resilience in college students. Our students are no different from what is being reported across the country on the state of late adolescence/early adulthood. There has

been an increase in diagnosable mental health problems, but there has also been a decrease in the ability of many young people to manage the everyday bumps in the road of life. Whether we want it or not, these students are bringing their struggles to their teachers and others on campus who deal with students on a day-to-day basis. The lack of resilience is interfering with the academic mission of the University and is thwarting the emotional and personal development of students.'

He also sent us a summary of themes that emerged in the series of meetings, which included the following bullets:

- Less resilient and needy students have shaped the landscape for faculty in that they are expected to do more handholding, lower their academic standards, and not challenge students too much.

- There is a sense of helplessness among the faculty. Many faculty members expressed their frustration with the current situation. There were few ideas about what we could do as an institution to address the issue.

- Students are afraid to fail; they do not take risks; they need to be certain about things. For many of them, failure is seen as catastrophic and unacceptable. External measures of success are more important than learning and autonomous development.

- Faculty, particularly young faculty members, feel pressured to accede to student wishes lest they get low teacher ratings from their students. Students email about trivial things and expect prompt replies.

- Failure and struggle need to be normalized. Students are very uncomfortable in not being right. They want to re-do papers to undo their earlier mistakes. We have to normalize being wrong and learning from one's errors.

- Faculty members, individually and as a group, are conflicted about how much 'handholding' they should be doing.

- Growth is achieved by striking the right balance between support and challenge. We need to reset the balance point. We have become a 'helicopter institution.'

Reinforcing the claim that this is a nationwide problem, the Chronicle of Higher Education recently ran an article by Robin Wilson entitled, 'An Epidemic of Anguish: Overwhelmed by Demand for Mental-Health Care, Colleges Face Conflicts in Choosing How to Respond' (Aug. 31, 2015). Colleges and universities have traditionally been centers for higher academic education, where the expectation is that the students are adults, capable of taking care of their own everyday life problems. Increasingly, students and their parents are asking the personnel at such institutions to be substitute parents. There is also the ever-present threat and reality of lawsuits. When a suicide occurs, or a serious mental breakdown occurs, the institution is often held responsible."

The article by Dr. Gray goes on to argue that many of these problems may have their roots in poor parenting, particularly helicopter parenting.

Helicopter parenting, of course, refers to those parents who are active in nearly every part of their children's lives. When anything appears to go wrong, they swoop in to help. Everything is about the success of the child, through which the parent seems to live vicariously.

Interestingly, these kids often demand the world change to meet their needs. Didn't do well on a test? Change the grade or I might threaten suicide. That idea made me uncomfortable? Make me safe or I'll get you fired.

One wonders, what are the lessons of the helicopter parent to the child besides those listed above by Dr. Gray and others? Is it that the child's well-being is more precious than that of the parent? Is it that the world should serve the child and the parent will see that it does? Is it that the child should always be safe and provided for? Do these things make for little emperors, manipulative narcissists, fragile snowflakes, or a little bit of each? Again, one wonders.