

Professor: The Reason College Students are 'Helpless' is...

In the last year or so, a handful of college faculty have been going public about the problems they see in the latest generation of students.

First it was the college president who described his students as ["day care"](#) kids victimized over every little offense. This viewpoint was seconded by Professor Jonathan Zimmerman, who suggested that colleges are [filled with infants](#).

The latest charge against students comes from Professor Lori Isbell. Writing for [Inside Higher Ed](#), Isbell describes a culture of "helplessness," in which students demand continual hand-holding throughout a course, assigned reading, or research paper.

Such an attitude, Isbell believes, stems partially from the digital age, where instant gratification and answers are at our fingertips every minute of every day.

But Isbell has come to believe that such helplessness is the outgrowth of another problem, namely, a shirking of responsibility:

"My colleague has a theory about the helplessness problem: he says students send emails as a deflection maneuver, and many are so reluctant to tackle the assignment at hand that they will employ a delaying tactic of sending inquiries instead. (Who is the writer? What was the assignment? When is the paper due? How long does it have to be?)

*I think he's onto something. We might provide the most detailed of written and oral instructions, but students will still find a reason, an occasion or excuse, to challenge those instructions as inadequate to their needs and (**attempt***

to) shift the responsibility of the work from them to us.

It becomes like a game of tennis, this batting around of responsibility. We serve an assignment over the net with clear guidelines and expectations, and they either let the ball drop, claiming they somehow weren't prepared (I didn't know ... You never told me ... The assignment sheet didn't say ...) or they question whether the ball was even fair in the first place (Too long! Too hard! Hey, out of bounds!).

We then serve it again, and again, to our great fatigue, but perhaps resolve that next time we won't bother to serve at all. Maybe next time, we think, we'll just hand the ball to the students and thereby absolve them of actual effort. We'll put the students in charge of the game; we'll forfeit, give up.

Which is probably just what many of them are angling for."

Isbell goes on to say that today's students certainly have the smarts to succeed in college; however, they are simply unwilling to put those smarts to the test and give them a good workout.

Hearing this, one can't help but ask, "Is this what the participation trophy generation has wrought?" Have we been so careful to:

- Protect our children
- Make sure they succeed
- Do their homework for them so they get an A
- Transport them to and from activities
- Go to bat for them against a teacher...

...that we are now faced with incapable, helpless young adults who must be spoon-fed through life?

Until we recognize that responsibility, not self-esteem, is one of the most important traits we can cultivate in a child,

then we can expect this culture of helplessness to continue.

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