

Free Kids, Free Society: Overcoming the Myths of 'Safetyism'

As America's "[great awakening](#)" continues to unfold, we see the emergence of a peculiar new brand of safetyism and self-protectionism. Whether observed in the range of [student-led riots and intimidation efforts](#) at college campuses or the [fear-mongering of white nationalists](#), the foundations of liberal democracy are increasingly being called into question – all that a select set of personal beliefs, fears, and anxieties might somehow be appeased.

These are the fruits of a culture that overcoddles and overprotects.

"What is new today is the premise that students are fragile," write Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in their book, [*The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*](#). "Even those who are not fragile themselves often believe that others are in danger and therefore need protection. There is no expectation that students will grow stronger from their encounters with speech or texts they label 'triggering.'"

Alas, whereas the spunky youngsters of yesteryear were content to yell and protest and lobby to suppress "uncomfortable speech," today's dissidents go farther still, claiming personal injury and "violence" at the mere mention of words they don't particularly prefer.

But while the threats to free speech are perhaps the most visible, they represent but one piece of a larger phenomenon of safetyism that stretches across communities and cultural institutions (religious, educational, economic, political, and otherwise). It's a "problem of progress," the authors argue –

an unintended byproduct of modern prosperity and the comforts it brings.

“We adapt to our new and improved circumstances, and then lower the bar for what we count as intolerable levels of discomfort and risk,” they write. Given that we, as humans, are fundamentally antifragile beings –becoming “rigid, weak, and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to respond vigorously” – we should be careful and cognizant of the side effects that economic prosperity can bring.

Instead, we have adopted a series of untruths about our supposed fragility, each clouding our cultural vision and leading us to raise children who are overly insulated and pre-programmed for self-victimization. In response, Lukianoff and Haidt recommend a resistance of sorts – one that involves “seeking out challenges (rather than eliminating or avoiding everything that ‘feels unsafe’), freeing yourself from cognitive distortions (rather than always trusting your initial feelings), and taking a generous view of other people, and looking for nuance (rather than assuming the worst about people within a simplistic us-versus-them morality).”

Without such a resistance, the very progress that has led to our newfound security will be difficult to maintain or sustain. As the authors go on to explore and explain, safetyism and self-focus have already begun to erode the social fabric, from increased political polarization to rising stress and anxiety to new movements of “helicopter” and “bulldozer” parenting to narrowed notions of justice, human rights, and human freedom.

Although the source of the struggle is varied, much of it begins in the family, where children first learn what it means to be human – and where they ought to learn what it means to be free.

Due to a mix of overprotective parenting styles and

legislation that prevents children from playing, roaming, exploring, creating, and working, we see opportunities for independence and responsibility beginning to fade from our cultural imaginations.

In their chapter on the “Decline of Play,” for example, Lukianoff and Haidt observe recent shifts toward highly monitored play environments and heavily structured days and weeks. Such a trend has already begun to foster an unnecessary dependence on adults, and more detrimentally, a lack of independence among children. Surveying studies from an intersection of psychologists, social scientists, and economists, we see how play deprivation can lead to increased anxiety and diminished social skills, among other things. “The effects of play deprivation and oversupervision may extend far beyond college,” they conclude.

To many, observing the norms of childhood play may seem like a trivial exercise, yet it shows how our smallest responses to modernity can have a significant effect on whether a child develops basic skills for self-governance and community interaction. When combined with the guidance our children are receiving in other areas – especially into the college years – the attitudes and assumptions begin to align and reinforce each other.

Reminding us of [Alexis de Tocqueville’s notion](#) about the “[spirit of association](#),” the authors note that healthy, free societies rely not on intrusive governments, protective policymaking, and onerous speech codes, but on connected communities through free, virtuous, and “antifragile” human beings.

Using free play (again) as an example, Lukianoff and Haidt explain how it is in the mundane corners of everyday life (in this case, parenting) that we can begin to prepare our youth for democracy in a free, prosperous, and globalized age:

Citizens of a democracy don't suddenly develop this art on their eighteenth birthday. It takes many years to cultivate these skills, which overlap with the ones that [psychologist] Peter Gray maintains are learned during free play. Of greatest importance in free play is that it is always voluntary; anyone can quit at any time and disrupt the activity, so children must pay close attention to the needs and concerns of others if they want to keep the game going. They must work out conflicts over fairness on their own; no adult can be called upon to side with one child against another.

[Economist Steve] Horwitz points out that when adult-supervised activities crowd out free play, children are less likely to develop the art of association: 'Denying children the freedom to explore on their own takes away important learning opportunities that help them to develop not just independence and responsibility, but a whole variety of social skills that are central to living with others in a free society. If this argument is correct, parenting strategies and laws that make it harder for kids to play on their own pose a serious threat to liberal societies by flipping our default setting from 'figure out how to solve this conflict on your own' to 'invoke force and/or third parties whenever conflict arises.'

In such a way, the authors argue, childhood is far more a season of "democracy prep" than it is of simply "test prep." If we fail to tailor our childrearing accordingly across institutions – family, schools, churches, etc. – we will continue to see the fruits of safetyism and self-protectionism on into adulthood.

Correcting these norms help our kids to become stronger, happier, and more responsible members of society, but it will also help our society remain free. Thus, rather than dwell and relish in our newfound state of security – insulating our kids

from risks and coddling them in their insecurities – we have the opportunity to *build* on our freedoms and progress, raising young people who have the health and wherewithal to confront the challenges that still remain.

We have an opportunity to “prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child,” as the authors encourage us to do. With freer kids, we might just gain a freer society.

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