

# Guarded Childhoods: The Impact of Safetyism on Elementary-Aged Children



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We are at a crossroads, one in which safetyism and screen use have come together to dramatically impact the daily lives, social well-being, and education of elementary-aged children. Too much of society's current conversation focuses on the most obvious aspects of the preteen and teenage years: social media use, self-harm / suicide and depression rates, and rising social phobias and anxiety. But where does it begin, and how did young adults get to this point? The change did not happen overnight. It is a major shift and it is occurring right under our noses.

Current legislation, such as age restrictions on social media, is a step in the right direction. But in isolation it is nothing more than a bandaid on a much larger problem — a problem that is wreaking havoc at the elementary level and steadily producing what we see more blatantly in the years that follow.

The term “safetyism” was coined by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in *The Coddling of the American Mind* to describe a culture where emotional and physical safety is prioritized above all else. This is often at the expense of other important aspects of life, such as learning, exploring, and developing resilience. These factors have caused shifts in the way we parent, resulting in new challenges for schools and significantly altering the education experience of today’s youth compared to previous generations. Since the late 1990s, we have seen a steady increase in media coverage of egregious incidents involving children, specifically in the forms of school shootings and abductions, as well as movements to better protect mental health. Parents, some of whom were already emotionally vulnerable, were given new catalysts for anxieties to grow. Many began acting in ways that exacerbated their child’s inability to fend for themselves. In an effort to protect them, they also began to shield them from struggles and failures. They did everything for their children. While this effort may have come from a place of genuine love and safety, parents unintentionally took away the simple tasks that allowed children to develop independence.

Learned behaviors, especially those surrounding a young child’s ability to think and care for themselves, influence development prior to and while attending elementary schools. This can impact how they transition into individuals who are able to adapt and cope with everyday challenges. Blinded by the love they have for their children, some parents do not clearly recognize the damage they inflict by not allowing a child to experience risks. It may come from their own insecurities, but adults do not like to see their offspring fail. This safetyism-style of parenting decreases a child’s ability to develop psycholog-

ical resilience. We cannot solve their world for them, yet for some parents, it is that urge that forces them to underestimate and overstimulate their children.

So how do we work our way back? We once had a reality structured in such a way that a child had the means to become a competent, capable, independent adult. But in contrast, today’s parents do too much for their children. Simple, mundane actions like preparing a child’s breakfast for them creates a reliance on adults. Particularly through grade school, reinforcing this type of dependent behavior is counterproductive to brain development and creating autonomy. While the long-term effects this will have on the current generation are not yet fully understood, professionals have already begun to see alarming short-term effects.

“Parents are constantly ‘doing’ for their child because it makes life easier... When they are tasked with something difficult or put in a stressful situation, they are just simply not equipped to handle it. We then see children lash out, cry, become anxious. If we want this generation, and future generations, to be better equipped to tackle life then we need to model how to handle different types of situations” (J. T., personal communication, February 5, 2025).

A child who is instead constantly encouraged to complete small tasks independently, such as zipping his jacket or cleaning her own plate, will transition into early adolescence remembering these seemingly minute behaviors. These moments are the small wins that provide boosts of confidence in their own capabilities. And these exact qualities drive the likelihood that children will be able to successfully handle increasing stressors as they mature.

The film *Screenagers Next Chapter: Addressing Mental Health in the Digital Age*<sup>1</sup> depicts a study where a child is given a puzzle to complete while a parent sits and watches. Although parents were asked not to help, after noticing their child struggling for mere minutes several could not resist the urge. Brain activity was monitored through the study; as a parent’s stress level decreased, the child’s stress level

increased. We tend to believe our actions are beneficial, and that is not always the case.

School professionals have seen shifts in the way younger students handle adversity. They point to marked differences in student behavior focused around self-esteem and confidence, and link parenting style as one of the factors that brought about this change. We consulted with a multitude of school professionals to gather their insights on the trends we are observing among elementary-aged students. They pointed out effects on student behavior and self-esteem, and many linked these in part to shifts in parenting styles.

“Now more than ever we are seeing helicopter parents and bulldozer parents (parents who seek to remove obstacles in their child’s path and seek to protect them from having to experience negative experiences and/or negative emotions). By solving problems for their children and removing barriers these parents are putting their children at a disadvantage in two key ways: 1) when children do not have the opportunity to practice problem solving and experience natural consequences like forgetting to hand in their homework and speaking to the teacher about opportunities to make it up by attending extra help, they do not learn this skill and instead learn to rely on others to solve problems for them, and 2) by fragilizing children and solving problems for them, parents are giving the tacit message of I had to solve this problem for you because you cannot handle it” (K. L., personal communication, February 5, 2025).<sup>1</sup> Ruston, D. (2025). *Screenagers Next Chapter* [Film]. MyDoc Productions.

At the elementary school age, we have seen significant changes in how students deal with the dysregulation that stems from experiencing small frustrations. The professionals we interviewed point to similar trends. One psychologist wrote, “I have noticed a decrease in distress tolerance, limited frustration tolerance, limited social problem-solving and a decrease in social risk taking. Today’s students seem to have less ability to self-soothe, self-regulate, and make eye contact” (K. L., personal communication,

February 5, 2025).

In *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt discusses this trend in depth. He describes the two modes associated with child development: discover mode (the mind and body react positively, such as a child playing in the park with no inhibitions) and defend mode (guarding against threats; becoming flooded with stress hormones).<sup>2</sup> He argues that years of fearful parenting have led to increasing instances of children being in defend mode more often than in discover mode, specifically noting the 1990s and early 2000s, when parents started giving kids less autonomy, as a substantial turning point. School guidance counselors now report seeing a steady stream of avoidance from students:

“Instances where avoidance is being used by kids as a coping mechanism for handling stress have increased... Examples of avoidance include not trying out for a team, refusing to take a test, quitting an activity when it becomes difficult, and/or requiring excessive adult reassurance and assistance before trying something new” (K. L., personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Evidence also points to glaring differences in how kids and young adults

deal with their own mental health as compared to the same age group ten or twenty years ago. On one hand, students today are more open to discuss their feelings and tend to be more retrospective:

“There has been a notable shift in how students approach mental health. Compared to students 10-15 years ago, today’s students are more open to discussing their emotions, stress, and mental health challenges. They use language that reflects a greater awareness of anxiety, depression, and self-care, which I see as a positive development” (T. M., personal communication, February 3, 2025).

This shift is important and can be utilized as a gateway for parents. Once the conversation is started, today’s children and teens will be more capable of addressing their internal struggles than teens of decades past. An area that was once highly stigmatized can now be used to open a discussion. But the risk of isolating our children and making them deal with these emotions on their own is far too great and far too easy nowadays. Particularly with the rise of smartphones, gaming devices, social media, and other technologies that lend themselves to play-in-isolation, parents must have an understanding of the dangers these pose to a child’s mental health.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Ruston, D. (2025). *Screenagers Next Chapter* [Film]. MyDoc Productions.

<sup>2</sup>Haidt, J., and Pratt, S. (2024). *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin Random House (p. 69).

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STEFANIE PALAZZOLO created My Homeschool Expert,<sup>®</sup> an education consulting company that matches homeschool families with expert coaches and professionals in their state.