

Cotton wool kids

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After nearly 20 years of teaching I think I've just about seen it all. What worries me now, two decades later, is what I'm not seeing.

In the past the children were resilient, robust and independent creatures, ready to give things a go. These days I am increasingly seeing children who are anxious, fearful, stressed or ambivalent. I consider two of the significant contributors responsible for this below.

Over-parenting

It is my observation that the primary reason for children having reduced resilience and independence is that parents have become far too engaged in the day-to-day minutiae of their children's lives. The micro management of their school lives, friendships, activities and emotions is resulting in children being inappropriately shielded from the experiences (and most importantly, the consequences) of disappointment, failure and regret.

This might not be news to many readers. However, what might not be apparent is the impact that such reliance is having on adults. Children now depend upon adults to solve all their problems. From opening lunchboxes to buttoning pants, caregivers have been so attentive and intuitive that children have learnt that they need not even ask to have their needs met. How many times in the schoolyard has a child held up an unopened muesli bar to my face or placed a shoe with untied laces in my lap, all without a word? How many times have I had to teach a child how to take a jumper off or put socks on? The lack of expressive language involved in these tasks deeply concerns me. Children have lost the ability to seek help through open communication. It worries me to think what the long-term ramifications of such inability to communicate will have on these children and their peers as they become functioning members of society.

Technology

A second significant contributor to the decrease in children's resilience, I believe, is their access to technology (TVs, iPads



and iPhones). Such technology is now pervasive in family lives and can require careful management not to have negative effects due to children relying on it for entertainment.

It is an interesting juxtaposition that the parent who is overly engaged in managing their child's day and emotions, also then uses technology in periods of downtime to keep their child entertained. The child lurches from having another person doing everything for them, to using technology that removes the need for them to entertain themselves. It is apparent that in these circumstances, the child's need to communicate with others is significantly diminished, and his or her coping strategies for dealing with problems or inactivity are never being developed.

I once had a parent ask if four hours of television a day was excessive. This poor mother was desperate for suggestions as to how she could reduce this time and bring

some routine into her household. This is not an isolated case. I myself have struggled with how best to implement management over the use of such media for my own children. I chose a rather extreme course of action and for several years I removed televisions from my home (and banned their access to iPhones and iPads), to curb my children's addiction to media. Children should not bear the brunt of the blame however as it is our own choices as parents and carers that enable such addictions. The pressures of work and everyday life and, dare I say, the additional time required for micromanaging our children's lives, means that parents often welcome their children's use of such media as it gives them a much needed 'break'.

It is becoming 'normal' for young children to struggle to maintain a coherent train of thought or to express themselves in a linear fashion. Are family conversations still occurring over the dinner table

or is our attention being diverted to the use of media (TV, iPads, computers and phones)?

It is common today for four-year-old children to have ready access to an iPad or iPhone. These devices are portable and can be used anywhere, anytime. As such, the child rarely faces a second of boredom as downtime is often devoted to the use of such devices. This results in children never learning to occupy themselves during periods of inactivity, and means that they are instantly 'bored' as soon as such devices are not available during downtime periods. Children have lost the imagination and power to occupy themselves without the crutch of these new technologies.

Children of all ages are also being introduced to the pressure to have the latest and most up-to-date versions of the most recent device.

It would not surprise anyone that I am increasingly finding lower levels of developed speech in preparatory school students. Children's vocabulary is also suffering. Phrases like 'fly a kite' or 'knit using a ball of wool', confuse children who have never seen or utilised these things before. We need to encourage our children to get outside, ask questions and learn through participation. I've witnessed many four year olds approach scissors and pens for the very first time as their parents thought such activities too messy or dangerous for home.

Technology has its place but only as a resource to increase our quality of life not diminish it.

Where has all our experiential learning gone?

Where has the appreciation and management of risk gone in our child's daily lives?

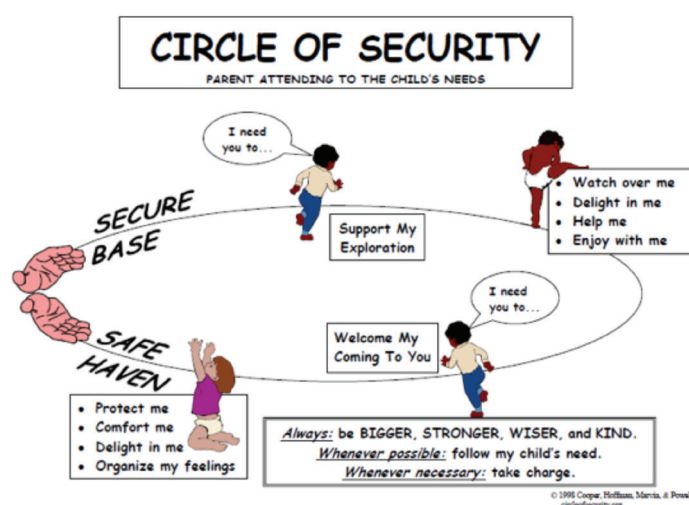
The ironic part is that as parents are shielding their children from risk and managing their lives for them, the very same parents also expect more of those children and that they be the best and brightest at everything they do. Unfortunately, without having a well-rounded, robust child with strong communication skills, the child's ultimate capabilities are being restricted - not enhanced.

As educators we feel increasing pressure to cover an ever-expanding curriculum, while at the same time teach skills ordinarily acquired before school entry.

Many years ago John Bowlby (1956) the founding father of Attachment Theory discussed the concept of the 'spoilt' or needy child. He suggested that it was natural for a child at around the age of four or five to seek greater independence. This naturally maturing function however could be hampered by a persistent and pathological need for connection on either the parents' or child's behalf. He went on to suggest that these aberrations in the natural order frequently occurred due to emotional disturbances in the parents' own childhoods.

The Circle of Security Early Intervention Program devised by Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell in the nineties grew from Bowlby's work on attachment theory and his suggestion is that "problem children grow up to be problem parents, who then create more problem children in the next generation" (p 590).

The Circle of Security program encourages parents to respond appropriately to their child's needs using cues from their interactions and behaviours. It also encourages parents to reflect on their own and their child's behaviour with regards to attachment levels. At the same time it supports parents in exploring their own history of childhood and how that can



influence their own parenting style.

It is important for parents therefore to become a secure base and safe haven for their children, each as important as the other. Parents these days too often provide their children with the safe, protective haven at the expense of exploration, investigation and experiential learning.

Parents are stepping in to complain about homework, friendship groups or discipline rather than allowing their children to deal with these issues independently. A university lecturer friend of mine has recounted stories of parents phoning to dispute assignment marks on behalf of their children.

Recent research has highlighted the ongoing effects this type of over-parenting can have. In the long term, children of these 'helicopter' parents demonstrate increased levels of depression and decreased satisfaction with life (Schiffirin, H, Liss, M, Miles-McLean, H, Geary, K, Erchull, M & Tasher, T 2014).

I think it's time we as parents stopped being so precious and gave our children permission to experiment, attempt and to occasionally stumble. We as educators must also recognise and support those families struggling with task of 'letting go'. Only then do we have the opportunity to pick our students up, dust them off and send them into the world braver and better able to handle life's challenges.

References

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About the author

Kelly McBurnie is the Prep Coordinator at St Peters Lutheran College, Indooroopilly. Kelly recently received the National Excellence in Teaching Award for Innovation and was nominated for Brisbane Person of the Year 2013. She has just received a nomination for Outstanding Alumnus of the Year 2014 - Griffith University.

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