

Raising HAPPY, CONFIDENT CHILDREN in the Digital, Post-COVID Age:

The cultural causes of the anxiety crisis in children and what we adults can do to help them



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“The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.” C.G. Jung

The Titanic Problem: How to Avoid Icebergs

Kids Are Not OK

Every two years since 1991, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have conducted a survey of high school students. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) “was developed in 1990 to monitor health behaviors that contribute markedly to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the United States.”¹

Since 1991, the YRBSS has collected data from more than 4.9 million high school students in more than 2,100 separate surveys. Here is the national summary of their 2019 data:

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/yrbs_data_summary_and_trends.htm

Many states and school systems participate in this survey—we encourage you to get the results from your state and community.

The Survey has four focus areas: sexual behavior, high-risk substance use, experiencing violence, and mental health and suicide. Broken out here are the national mental health and suicide numbers from the surveys in 2009 and 2019:

The percentage of high-school students who

Experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness:

2009 -- 26.1	2019 -- 36.7
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Seriously considered attempting suicide:

2009 -- 13.8	2019 -- 18.8
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Made a suicide plan:

2009 -- 10.9	2019 -- 15.7
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Attempted suicide

2009 -- 6.3	2019 -- 8.9
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Were injured in a suicide attempt that required treatment:

2009 -- 1.9	2019 -- 2.5
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There are many numbers in the other categories that are equally as disturbing.

Not surprisingly, since COVID, things have gotten a lot worse. In one survey taken in summer 2020², 62.9% of 18-24 year olds said they were suffering from anxiety or depressive disorder. Forty-six percent said they were suffering from a COVID-related TSRD (trauma- and stressor-related disorder). Almost a quarter (24.7%), said they had started or increased substance use to cope with pandemic-related stress or emotions. The percentage of those seriously considering suicide was 25.5%. All in all, 74.9% of respondents reported experiencing at least one mental health or behavioral health symptom.

These statistics are not surprising to many teachers, coaches, and school administrators, who deal with so many students who are stressed, anxious, and have other mental health problems. The challenge is widespread and cuts across geographic and socioeconomic lines. And it started before COVID: the pandemic has exacerbated this problem, not caused it.

My name is Jeff Levin, and for my almost-forty-year career, I have been helping young people and families. I started as a middle-school teacher, then went to social work school and worked as a school counselor and psychotherapist. Frustrated that therapy often didn't work well with these age groups, I became a life coach, as the flexibility and focus on fixing problems in real time was a much better modality for young people. I currently work not only with individuals and families but with teams and schools, so it is accurate to say that I work with thousands of kids a year, across the socioeconomic and diversity spectrums. I have written this booklet with my business partner and wife, Miranda Levin.

What I have noticed over the past 20 years is what the YRBSS and, more importantly, the kids have been telling us: that there is a growing number of young people who are stressed and anxious. Kids who lack resilience and confidence. Kids who never have fun. Kids who are dependent on their devices and their parents, but certainly not themselves. Kids whose lives are already part of the rat race and who are focused on results, not the journey. They are overwhelmed when they are out of their comfort zone. Many of them experience almost everything in their world through their devices. They don't know how to push themselves. Or they can push themselves in the service of what others want, because they are terrified to fail and disappoint adults—but joylessly. They are supremely focused on goals and ambitions (as mentioned, often those of their parents, not their own) but not so much their dreams and simple joy. They appear to be successful, yet so many are sad. They achieve, yet they often feel completely powerless. These kids are not OK.

They are worried about what is going on in the world: Terrorism. Climate change. Our political system. Shootings. These geopolitical phenomena, which the adult community is clearly not handling—what we at Jeff Levin Coaching call the [Overwhelming Tragedy List](#)—are a big reason why so many kids are stressed, anxious, and depressed. And, because they do not want to disappoint their parents, they can be very good at hiding it.

Kids are telling us in other ways they are not OK, every day. They are in pain and don't feel alive, so they try to numb their pain—or to feel through their numbness—through vaping, drugs, sexting (using the Internet to send or receive sexually explicit photos—which, in the cases I hear about, more often than not, are selfies), sex, cyber-bullying, cutting, or thinking about killing themselves and, too often, attempting it. Others cope through over-achievement and unhealthy competition, whether in the classroom or in athletics, music, or whatever. Or they just sit in their parents' homes and play video games, often right into their 20s.

I am not the only person who is reporting this: most of the professionals with whom I talk—pediatricians, teachers, coaches, school administrators, and some worried parents—are all seeing the same things. And the YRBSS and other research are bearing our observations out.

These behaviors are what we call both the elephant in the room and the proverbial tip of the iceberg. What's below the water—and what is driving these behaviors—is tremendous stress and disconnection, not just in children, but in all corners of our communities. But children feel it the most.

In this booklet, we are going to tell you what is causing these terrible changes in our kids, which we call *Digititis*, and provide its psychological underpinnings. We'll also give you a couple of tips on how to help your kids—and yourselves. Because we adults are also victims of the Digititis problem.

We'll discuss the cultural factors that affect our kids directly and also cause parents to parent differently (and educators and coaches to ply their trades differently) from previous generations, which, of course, greatly affects kids. Although it has always been hard to be a teenager—and to parent them—these cultural factors make it even tougher for everyone. We'll discuss how this Digital Age causes parents to use (with the best of intentions) what we call the [*New Parenting Playbook*](#), which veers from supporting normal development in children and goes against decades of psychological research. This playbook encourages parents to “prepare the road for the child instead of the child for the road” and negatively impacts children.

The Good News

Fortunately, there are a lot of things we can do to mitigate the problems caused by the Overwhelming Tragedy List and the New Parenting Playbook. Kids are hard-wired the same way they have always been, with the same needs for connection, support, limits, and independence. As long as we meet those needs, ideally collaborating with the other adults in our kids' lives, even if we have to do remedial work, our kids will be OK. We just need to learn new ways to meet their needs while not driving ourselves crazy with worry.

We wrote this booklet to both name the problems and to let you know that there are solutions to these problems. We will suggest ways of building family, school, and team cultures that *reduce* kids' anxiety, as well as build face-to-face connections and generally reconnect us, bringing us back from the Digital Age precipice. We include schools and coaches because the more everyone in the child's

life—parents, school, team—can collaborate, the better the outcome. By so doing, we make it much easier for children to resolve the life challenges we all face and develop the solid identities so critical to a happy and truly productive adulthood.

The Cause of the Problem

One thing I frequently ask parents is to talk about their childhoods. They often wax poetic about playing with their friends after school or on weekends and having to be “home by six” so the family could have dinner together. They talk about secret places no adults knew about and playing with their friends in their neighborhood—or beyond—without adult supervision. They weren’t thinking about—or even aware of—the news, or anything except what they were doing. They were experts in “the inefficient use of time,” as former New Hampshire Supreme Court Chief Justice and mental-health crusader John Broderick likes to put it; they had minimal extracurricular activities and could spend time as they wished. Their parents couldn’t check up on them (and, for the most part, didn’t feel the need to). They were figuring things out on their own, creating worlds in their imaginations, resolving problems with their friends or situations they got into. They usually speak fondly of their childhoods.

Then I ask them whether their child is having a similar childhood, with the same great memories.

You know the answer: they’re not. They often have little or no unsupervised play in the neighborhood or even free time. They almost never get out of their own heads to be completely in the moment without worrying about what has happened or is going to happen in their lives or the world. Their parents can reach them at any time, check up on them, or even track their movements.

Many kids are given few opportunities to figure things out on their own, use their imaginations, resolve problems, or get in or out of trouble.

In short, children today are not having much of a childhood.

I know I sound like just another old fart who is nostalgic about the “good old days.” Although I *am* an old fart, I am not being nostalgic. People have always had problems, even back in the good old days (whenever those were). Life has never been perfect for any generation. What I am saying is there are things that are different today—the Overwhelming Tragedy List, for one—that exponentially amplify problems and make them harder to solve. Digititis adds a baseline level of anxiety that kids in previous generations never had. Life really is tougher for both kids and adults, and because it’s come on so quickly, we haven’t even come to terms with its repercussions. But we need to if we’re going to help our kids.

How did we get here? *The Bombardment* is our term for the amalgam of cultural and societal issues that have changed kids and parenting over the last 20 years or so. The Bombardment affects kids in two ways: directly, of course, but, as I’ve said, it also causes parents to parent differently, often without even realizing it. Much of my work with families addresses these challenges.

What The Bombardment Has Done to Kids

Unlike previous generations, which often had limited exposure to the news, because of our phones, kids know exactly what is going on in the world today. So, as we have said, they have to contend with the *Overwhelming Tragedy List*:

- Global warming: We have climate change that is already creating extreme weather patterns that cause devastation and immigration.

- Mass shootings, most particularly at schools: We have regular fatal attacks in places that used to be 100% safe: schools, movie theaters, houses of worship, shopping areas, etc., and kids now have to ask for their basic safety needs to be met.
- Terrorism—domestic, international, extremist, etc.
- The opioid epidemic: When I do workshops for high school and college athletes, I often ask the kids how many have lost a friend or family member to a drug overdose. It isn't uncommon for 50-75% to raise their hands.
- A drastically rising suicide rate across the board, from young kids to teens to adults.
- A society where just about everybody, child and adult, is addicted to the computers in their pockets.
- Massive political rancor, corruption, and hypocrisy.
- An unprecedented and seemingly insurmountable wealth gap where everyone, rich and poor, feels financially insecure.

And now you can add to the list:

- COVID
- Our current reckoning with social justice and the preservation of our democracy, with everyone being a witness.

These are scary times. And kids know all about these things.

It is no surprise that young people are wondering, consciously or not, whether the adults in their lives have things under control.

Included on the Overwhelming Tragedy List is our political system. Politics used to be a process where people with divergent beliefs peacefully resolved their differences through discussion and

compromise. Now it's zero-sum, winner-take-all, and more than a few individuals put personal gain over the common good. Compromise and common decency are quickly becoming anachronisms. Honest disagreements—you know, where people used to be able to have a discussion when they were on opposite sides of an issue and, at worst, respectfully agreed to disagree—are also things of the past. Different viewpoints now become tribal wars. And, while we castigate our politicians for acting this way, in reality they are only a reflection of society—of us—where we are teaching our children that achievement rules all, winners take all, the world should be viewed in black-and-white, and that every expression of disagreement is a personal attack. So we have a generation of kids whose fight-or-flight response is triggered every time someone expresses an opinion different from their own and who live in fear of being “cancelled.” Increasingly, so do we, their parents, teachers, and coaches.

But the biggest change is we have phones in our pockets. Nearly 95% of teenagers have access to a smart phone, according to the Pew Research Center³. And 45% say they are online constantly.

This points to the biggest problem with devices: we never shut them off, not kids and not adults, either. (This makes Albert Einstein, who said, “I fear the day when the technology overlaps with our humanity. The world will only have a generation of idiots,” very prescient, indeed.)

So although people argue that world events were just as scary in earlier generations, the difference today is our devices remind us about the scary things 24 hours a day, every day, often in real time. Not too many years ago, that kind of news would only be seen during a 6:00 or 11:00 news report, or in the morning papers. We got a break from the news for the rest of the day.

Not only is news available all of the time now, it is unedited. So when ISIS beheads a reporter, it is online for everyone to see, including our kids.

Even when we don't consciously seek out the news, it is there, such as when it streams on a social media feed. News outlets are no longer seen as the objective bastions they once were; fear-mongering and sensationalism sells. Polarization sells. So our kids never get a break from the fear, rancor, and confusion. Never.

As our society gets more polarized, kids learn less about shades of grey and are taught only to see the world in black and white. Not only does that hurt critical thinking and the ability to work with others, when we believe that all those who disagree with us are "scary," we experience more stress.

It's not just the news. Social media also never allows children to unplug from the stress of being kids. Kids used to worry about not being popular at school but could be themselves at home or hanging out with their friends. Smartphones for our kids have become weapons that allow the "24-hour judgement cycle," as educator Ryan Brown has coined it, where there is never a break from bullying or trying to impress peers whose curated social media personas always make the real lives of those reading them feel inferior. Now the "cool" kids follow the "uncool" kids everywhere via their phone feeds. Children used to be bullied on the playground; now they are bullied everywhere, for everyone to see, on social media. Needless to say, all of these things cause constant stress, anxiety, and depression.

Finally, kids try to use *communication* devices as *connection* devices. It doesn't work, leaving them feeling disconnected and depressed. As Carl Jung said: "Loneliness does not come from having no

people around, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.”

In short, the smart phone is a developmental/psychological Trojan Horse that has invaded our homes, schools, and our kids’ minds and hearts. No matter how much time you spend with it, there’s no emotional growth on a screen.

What The Bombardment Has Done to Parents

The other part of the problem for kids is what The Bombardment has done to parents. Kids are not the only stressed-out people in our culture: adults are plenty stressed as well. Many things are the same for both groups, but adults have additional problems:

The every-second news feed feeds parental fears. Parents also see the Overwhelming Tragedy list, which makes them feel as though the world is a dangerous and scary place. One example of this is every child abduction that takes place around the country gets coverage.⁴ Even though research has shown that there are actually very few child abductions by strangers, and the vast majority of abductions are carried out by family friends or family members of the victims, many parents still have the impression that child abductions by strangers are a significant threat and do not ever allow their children to play outside unsupervised. Walk to school? No way. So the messages parents (often unconsciously) send their children is, “The world is not safe...you can’t handle it...we must protect you...we don’t dare let you explore or even go out on your own.” The developmental/psychological implications of this message are catastrophic for kids.

Another huge source of fear is financial. In the 20th century, this country prided itself that each generation exceeded the standard of living of the preceding generation. That’s the American Dream,

the very definition of success in the U.S. The problem is that over time, people in all economic strata—even those who have “made it” financially by any definition—started to think that, to be successful, kids needed to do as well or better than their parents no matter how well the parents did.

Unfortunately, these days often both parents need to work full-time (or more) to maintain their lifestyle, or even just get by, which is stressful, especially with the expectations that exist in the workplace today for long hours, high productivity, and being on call all day, every day, through our devices. This lack of boundaries around work often distract parents from fully attending to their kids.

The widening wealth gap is also a huge problem for those whose parents and grandparents were not given the economic and educational opportunities of the 19th and 20th centuries and who have struggled as a result. Needless to say, not having enough money is extremely stressful in and of itself, and a lot of families don't have enough resources these days. Some are understandably still hoping to board that American Dream Train and pin their hopes on their children lifting up the entire family, so they put pressure on their children that way.

One of the biggest sources of stress is the cost of college, which is a significant financial burden these days for even upper-middle-class families. Many jobs that used to require only a high school degree or GED now weed out candidates without a college degree. So not going to college, or not doing well in college, is no longer an option in many cases. For young people in college, many parents feel they must get “a return on investment” by having their kids be financially successful. They don't believe their children will be able to make it unless they make a ton of money. Students with loans must get a high-enough paying job in order to be able to pay back those loans, which can

get to be a staggering amount quickly. And children who don't do well in college, thus wasting so much of their and/or their parents' money, feel ashamed.

The Result

Essentially, what we have are parents who parent from fear: fear that some harm is going to come to their child if they are out on their own. Fear that the world is too scary a place and their child needs to be protected from it. Fear that their child will not be successful in life unless they go to an Ivy League college and work on Wall Street. Fear that their child won't succeed on their own or is going to fall behind.

As a result, Digital Age parents create a cocoon, where only the immediate family matters. Life becomes a state of siege where the wagons are circled, and all perceived "attacks" from the outside world—a bad grade, not enough playing time on the soccer field, and other parts of normal childhood—are responded to as if they were actual attacks. And normal childhood development goes out the window.

The upshot is many parents are so focused on protecting their children from this scary world they neglect to prepare them for it.

It is this fear that has caused the development of the ***New Parenting Playbook***, where enabling parents snowplow obstacles away from their kids to make sure they never fail, thus reversing parenting patterns and mores that had lasted generations. Many parents are not teaching their kids morals, values, and emotional skills, but preparing them for financial success only. Sometimes it seems that they are managing their kids' careers more than they are parenting them. They get

infected with what we call [Outcome Fever](#), where they focus on appearances and outcomes, on what their child accomplishes instead of who they are.

In their efforts to protect their children, many parents haven't allowed their kids to be kids. If "it takes a village" to raise a child, many parents cut their children off from that village and can count on one hand the number of times they let another adult supervise their child outside of school. And when do they let their children go out on their own? *Never* is the answer a lot of parents would give these days. Kids are hardly, if ever, allowed to go out and get themselves into trouble, get themselves out of trouble, problem solve, or find out who they are as individuals. They have not been allowed to fail or face consequences. To take risks. To have fun with their friends in unstructured, unsupervised play. Their parents have big goals and ambitions for them, but they haven't allowed their kids to pursue *their own* dreams, where true pursuit comes from the heart and involves certain risks of disappointment and failure. Parents load children with material goods and "quality time," yet ironically are so distracted with their phones and work they aren't present emotionally even when they are spending that "quality time" with their kids.

In short, imagination, independence, intestinal fortitude (courage, guts, or grit), intimacy, and integrity—all crucial for identity formation—what we call the **6Is**, have been thrown out the window. And the result is stressed-out, anxious, sad kids who do not enjoy contentment and do not experience excitement about the whole of living. **Because they don't know who they are or feel they have any control over their own lives.**

Children need unstructured play. They need increasing autonomy from their parents. They need to take risks appropriate for their age. They need to learn how to fail and how to persevere. They need to learn how to tell truth from lies and how to resolve conflicts. They need to separate from their

parents and learn what makes themselves tick. By not allowing children to learn these things, which previous generations learned by osmosis, New Parenting Playbook parenting interferes with every stage of healthy childhood development our founding fathers of psychology wrote about and research has confirmed.

Suburban Boston parents living in a solidly middle- and upper-class town receive a phone call, mid-COVID, from their twenty-year-old son's dean at a prestigious university. The dean says the young man is failing his classes; in fact, it seems he hasn't been to class in at least six weeks, and the dean is deeply concerned, having met with this bright, high-achieving college sophomore and found him depressed, disheveled, and floundering.

The parents immediately fly out and find their son crying, claiming to be "addicted" to marijuana, "depressed," ashamed, and wanting to come home.

I'm brought in and discover well-intentioned, very capable, bright middle-class parents who have been swept up into thinking that outcome = value, that if one attends a "fine" college or university one's path is pretty well guaranteed, even though they, like 90% of Baby Boomers and Gen X'ers, weren't raised that way and didn't follow that path themselves.

The Outcome Fever route to success actually worked well with two of the boy's siblings; his third, however, also struggled through childhood with much more visible clinical anxiety. The family's "story," if you will, was that the sister's struggles were who she is—all good. As for the boy, even as he now acknowledges and clearly HAS true Generalized Anxiety (clinically), and a pretty moderate case of ADHD, was never able to acknowledge that struggle and ask for help. Was he moody? Obsessive?

Increasingly angry and high? Yes, but the “story” here became, “He is lazy; He doesn’t get it; He’s not trying.”

It’s clear his only remaining option was to shut down to the point of suicidal ideation and despair.

This doesn’t stop with childhood: now, adult children have to estrange themselves from their parents long-term, just to separate from them, as Joshua Coleman writes:

But in other cases, estrangement is born from love. One of the downsides of the careful, conscientious, anxious parenting that has become common in the United States is that our children sometimes get too much of us—not only our time and dedication, but our worry, our concern. Sometimes the steady current of our movement toward children creates a wave so powerful that it threatens to push them off their own moorings; it leaves them unable to find their footing until they’re safely beyond the parent’s reach. Sometimes they need to leave the parent to find themselves.

“A Shift in American Family Values Is Fueling Estrangement”

The Atlantic, Jan. 10, 2021

This is why we’re raising a generation of kids who are using devices, Snapchat, sex, work, working out, stress, drugs, alcohol, cutting themselves, and achievement to feel alive or numb their pain because they were not allowed to use normal channels to figure out who they are. Kids who don’t know how to truly connect. Kids who don’t have a healthy, external “secret” life separate from their parents. So what happens? They develop an unhealthy, *internal* secret life in order to attempt to separate. This is a life enshrouded, a life unwittingly full of dangerous risks that fuel kids’ innate

need to push limits. And many parents don't have a clue what is going on or how their children really feel.

I worked with a junior hockey team for a couple days last winter. During lunch, a few boys were laughing in such a way that I knew they wanted me to hear. "What's this about?" I asked with a smile. Turns out one kid, age 19, disclosed to me that he had had sex—though that's not the way he put it—with 17 different girls he hooked up with on Tinder. He's a "good kid." Why was he compelled to have meaningless, serial sex with 17 girls?

There are thousands of high-achieving, yet miserable children, many of whom put on a brave face to avoid disappointing their over-invested parents or become stressed because they think that their parents will only love them if they achieve.

Once you get them talking, youngsters will tell you how stressed and worried they are. Many young people secretly feel very doubtful, ashamed, guilty, and inferior. Here's what I hear all the time:

- "I think I'm connected, but I don't *feel* connected, so maybe something's wrong with me."
- Academic, athletic, and extra-curricular achievement, as a means to the end of being "successful" by their parents' definition, is to be achieved at the expense of relaxing, experiencing, and growing. "I better do well at everything, or I'm a big disappointment—I can tell how much my parents, teachers, and coaches care about how I do, but not who I am."
- Parents that are on the same treadmill model this kind of life—"It's go, go, go for all of us: achieve, achieve, achieve! I can never relax; I must always do well, and, if I don't, I probably don't have what it takes."

Another critical point is the Iron Age took hundreds of years to arrive and end. The Industrial Revolution—cotton gins, steam engines, internal combustion—took decades to be part of our culture. But the Digital Age/Bombardment has taken us by storm, like a silent tornado whose damage has been wrought only over a couple of decades. Never mind the kids—so many adults are way more frazzled, disconnected, rushed, addicted to devices, and stressed than we used to be. We adults, whether we are parents, education professionals, or even academics, have not had the time to acknowledge, discuss, digest, process, and understand the Digital Age’s ramifications on kids, ourselves, our families, and our communities.

We haven’t even begun to process all this, let alone discuss why it happened or think about solutions. We’re enjoying the “convenience” of instant, Amazonian, iPhonian results; we can navigate, promulgate, Tweet, Facebook, and Netflix to our hearts’ delight, but the fact remains that we are often not even aware of the changes we have allowed and seemingly, particularly in the eyes of our kids, fully endorsed. **So more and more of us are not really OK, and, of course, our kids sense it.**

As for our kids, the Digital Age is all they know. Young people are the barometer of the Digital Age, the canaries in this mostly undiscussed, poorly understood Digital-Age coal mine. As we’ve unwittingly gone with the digital flow and become distracted from the essentials of giving our attention to our kids, inviting them to try, to strive, to fail, to be imaginative and independent, we have, in some measure, lost them to a world they mediate through their phones. When you add parents infected with Outcome Fever, who carefully curate their childrens’ choices and growth—the kids end up in a world full of anxiousness marked by a lack of confidence and voice.

What's important to note is all of these things are part of the same syndrome—the iceberg: The things you can see, such as the suicide rate, drug abuse, over-protective parenting, etc., are the part above the water. But what's underneath the water—the pain, the stress, the loss of the 6I's, (imagination, independence, intestinal fortitude, integrity, intimacy, and identity), and more—is a much bigger problem that affects many more people than those who exhibit the signs you can see. It affects all of us.

Noted psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott (1896–1971) coined the term *holding environment* for that positive, safe, predictable environment parents create in their home for a baby. Well, the fabric of the cultural holding environment, in a scant generation, has begun to radically tear.

Kids haven't changed: they still crave connection, communication, and acceptance, and they love to help one another and the people in their lives. This is both the challenge and the key to the solution. The challenge is they not only have to have these critical human experiences, their motivation has to come from within, not just to please their parents. So, for instance, while they might have actually gone through the motions of “service” for their college résumé, without an underlying connection to their own motivations and dreams, they often don't really experience the great, visceral joys of connection, of communication, of striving and accomplishment, of working with others on a collective goal, of truly being of service to another. If we can get them to experience and truly feel the real emotions of a healthy adolescence, connected to other people, they will get better. It's that simple.

The problem seems big, even overwhelming, but the solutions are simple (although not necessarily easy). And there are small steps parents, teachers, and coaches can start immediately that can have a huge impact. We'll give you some suggestions later in this booklet.

The Psychological Underpinnings

"We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses." C.G. Jung

In my almost 40 years of working with kids, the single greatest predictor of whether a hurting child will get better is their parents' willingness to change. In this Bombardment of the Digital Age, the adult community **must** be willing to change for the sake of the kids. The first step is to admit that there is a problem, both for kids and adults.

The Bombardment and our reaction to it (or lack thereof) represents a nightmare for any developmental psychologist; not only are the 5I's in jeopardy and the holding environment in tatters with no acknowledgement from the adults in kids' lives, but other bedrock psychological theory tells us how far off-course we are. As an example, we will take a look at Erik Erikson's *Eight Ages of Man*.

The Eight Ages

In the mid-eighties, I was terribly confused in social work graduate school. I found Freud and a lot of the other material I was trying to learn really thick and inaccessible. The one shining light, however—the one psychological theory I found simple, elegant, and extremely powerful—was Erik Erikson's (1902–1994) *Eight Ages of Man*. His simple distillation of all the most complex, mystifying psychology I've ever studied rings true to this day.

I am not going to go in depth here on The Eight Ages. However, there are some crucial things about it that anyone who spends time with kids needs to know.

First of all, the Eight Ages themselves:

Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust

Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt

Initiative vs. Guilt

Industry vs. Inferiority

Identity vs. Role Confusion

Intimacy vs. Isolation

Generativity vs. Self-Absorption

Integrity vs. Despair

And then the Benefits or Deficits Conferred by each age:

1. Trust and Hope vs. Mistrust and Despair
2. Autonomy and Will vs. Shame, Doubt, and Weariness
3. Initiative and Purpose vs. Guilt and Meaninglessness
4. Industry and Competence vs. Inferiority and Incompetence
5. Identity and Fidelity vs. Isolation and Infidelity
6. Intimacy and Love vs. Role Confusion and Hatred
7. Generativity and Care vs. Stagnation and Self-Centeredness
8. Integrity and Wisdom vs. Despair and Confusion

Erikson's Eight Ages encompass the entire lifespan, and each step builds on the one before. You enter life at Stage One, Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust, and finish at the eighth stage, Integrity vs.

Despair. You “negotiate” Ages 1–5 in childhood and adolescence, with a lot of help from your parents and other fundamental caretakers, if all goes well. For example, in the first Age, the newborn develops trust, but only if they have nurturing caregivers. If not, the baby develops mistrust. It is the same in each succeeding Age: The toddler starts exploring their world and finds some autonomy and initiative. The kindergartner learns how to do things on their own. The teenager begins to figure out who they are and gets truly close—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—with friends and lovers. The adult makes their mark in the world and then carries an integrity into old age that nothing can shake. Those are the words on the left side of the “vs.”

The words on the right side describe when things don’t go so well. Ideally, you will be predominantly on the left side so you can be filled with and empowered by trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. Sounds good, no? Way better than mistrust, shame and doubt, inferiority, isolation, role confusion, stagnation, and despair. But what if your experiences put you on that side?

The foundation of the Eight Ages is the first Age: newborns, to grow up happy and healthy, need to develop basic trust in their caretakers and, eventually, themselves. Every other stage builds on this: it’s hard to enjoy autonomy, initiative, industry, and so on without what Erikson called “basic trust.” The little child sensing and knowing that they can trust their caretakers, the world, and themselves—this is the fundamental building block of the child’s psychological life. Without the establishment of that basic trust, a child doesn’t do well in the ensuing stages.

Leaving the Bombardment out of the discussion for a moment, in a happy home where parents and other adults involved in the child’s life either had the benefits of a trustworthy, integrated, largely

nurturant, peaceful childhood themselves or have fought their way back from familial/childhood adversity, a child will spend most of their time on the left side of the versus.

And can I add my own equation to this? You've already seen The 6I's: Imagination + Independence + Intestinal Fortitude + Integrity + Intimacy = Identity.

If you "pass" Erikson's Ages, you develop the first five I's, and these are the components of identity: who you are. But if you fail to develop the needed trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry, then you enter adulthood without a solid, growing identity—which is precisely what is happening to so many children today.

As we mentioned, with previous generations (what we call the "Analog Age"), negotiating Erikson's stages depended largely on your caretakers at home and a known local community, one where parents and teachers/coaches collaborated, one where family, neighborhoods, and religious institutions helped instill the critical Eriksonian and 6I intangibles. Today, however, in the Digital Age, with the Bombardment, many kids no longer learn some basic emotional skills that allow people to successfully negotiate everyday life. It's no one's fault that this happened. And, thankfully, as we've said, these skills can be taught remedially—most of the time you can go back and fix even early Age problems.

What Are Parents Missing?

No parent wakes up in the morning intending to do bad things to their kids. However, we're all caught up in the Digital Age, and, because it has come up on all of us so quickly, we haven't thought through its implications. Thankfully, our kids are amazingly resilient, so thinking about these problems now—and even just slightly changing our course—can make a huge difference. If you are

feeling that you might have made some mistakes in an early stage, the beautiful thing about Erikson's Ages is, for most people, it is never too late to go back and correct deficits.

There are three dynamics of parenting in the Digital Age that contribute fundamentally to today's children's more challenging negotiation of the Eriksonian ages and resultant anxiety:

Problem #1 is that parents are digitally distracted and not mirroring on a granular level. A parent with a phone in one hand and a baby in the other is looking at the phone, not returning that baby's gaze. Doing emails instead of playing with their seven-year-old or helping their thirteen-year-old who is stuck on a homework problem. Never sitting down together, so the sad look in a child's eye is missed. Parents aren't consciously deciding to ignore their children—it just happens because of the nature of devices and how we use them.

If parents and other key adults in a kid's life are fundamentally distracted by their phones or other devices, that baby, toddler, tween, or teen literally doesn't get properly held and consistently "mirrored."

What is mirroring? Think goo-goo, gaa-gaa; deep, undistracted eye contact and presence; parents on a daily basis automatically knowing what kids are feeling and going through, letting the kid know they know, and physically and emotionally being there for the child. That's mirroring, and the child ends up, so to speak, carrying their mom and dad around in their heart. They trust that their key adults have their back forever and with no questions asked. That constant feeling inside is much of what Erikson meant with "Basic Trust." Lack of mirroring—that is, the lack of focused, attentive parenting—does not result in that Basic Trust children need in the first Age.

The second problem is the use of the New Parenting Playbook—enabling kids, solving their problems for them, overly smoothing their paths or “snowplowing,” removing them from adversity—and thus hamstringing their ability to navigate the world. By smoothing everything out, parents rob their kids of the chance to successfully succeed at Ages 2–4, which cripples them for the later Ages.

The truth is most of these children are simultaneously *spoiled and neglected*: spoiled from the snowplowing and helicoptering, and neglected because of their parents’ distraction caused by devices.

One of my clients, a dad of a 17- and 15-year-old, has learned this the hard way. “Jeff, I simultaneously spoiled my son and expected way too much of him! He got everything, from the best hockey skates money could buy every year to a new car at 16-and-a-half to trips all over the world twice a year. At the same time, I rode him too hard with grades, with hockey; I see now I was living through my son, but I confused the heck out of him, and we’re both paying the price.”

When they should develop organic autonomy and initiative, our trust-challenged toddlers suffer, as they are not able to take those first steps of initiative and autonomy because Mommy and Daddy are over-involved and hyper-focused on results. Our tweens struggle to negotiate autonomy and initiative vs. shame, doubt, and guilt as they answer constant questions about results, not whether they had fun, tried their best, or learned how to be patient or kind.

As our teenagers seek true internal industry and identity, a heartfelt sense of purpose and meaning, their struggles intensify. Many teenagers are addicted to their phones. They have learned from their parents to be obsessed with the outcome of their work and are comparing themselves to the

idealized digital versions of peers they see on social media. As mentioned, they are being raised by distracted, stressed parents, who suffer from Outcome Fever. Our teens are often surrounded by other adults—teachers and coaches and bosses and members of their extended family—who are also feeling and behaving stressed and stretched.

And don't think they don't know it. I had one teenager tell me he was being raised by his phone and his friends.

Moreover, many teenagers—and I hear this constantly and in huge numbers—are terrified to disappoint their parents. They have sensed since Day One that the adults in their lives are living through them, gushing about every success and trying to make every struggle disappear. The problem with Outcome Fever is that kids start to feel that if they let their parents down, their parents will stop loving them—that their parents' love is conditional. Carl Jung said, "*Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their children than the unlived life of the parent.*" Outcome Fever is a common manifestation of this phenomenon.

Nick, a twenty-year-old junior hockey player, stood up in a recent team-building session with his teammates and me and announced, "I'm done living for my parents, trying to please them all the time." Breaking into tears, he continued, "It's too much pressure! If I f**ed up in hockey, I'd be miserable the whole rest of the game and even into the next one. If I did sh**y on a test, same. I just can't do this anymore; I can't!" he exclaimed while his teammates and I watched in amazement and utter respect.

Seen through the lens of the Eight Ages, it's clear his parents had unconsciously torpedoed Nick's ability to trust his own abilities, to develop autonomy, initiative, and industry—independence, in

other words. They'd imbued his psyche with the unseen directive, "Don't screw up, because if you do, you'll lose our approval," which, in the New Parenting Playbook is the prime engine of the kid's success. Achievement = happy parents, and failure = unhappy parents. No wonder today's kids are so afraid to fail.

As they move to college, young people will ideally have intimate, smooth relationships; the critical skills of problem-solving and conflict resolution; the ability to strive for independence; and a sense of self that is strong enough for them to think creatively, imaginatively, and courageously without worrying about people's opinions. They should be able to turn distraction into composure, over-stimulation into calm, and anxiety into confidence. Instead, our nineteen-year-olds are hampered by not having accrued sufficient trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry to develop that solid identity upon which intimacy, generativity, and integrity grow. **In short, many kids lack courage, imagination, independence, and grit to see and feel who they want to be and go for it.**

Digital Age parenting results in a vicious circle: the kids never progress, so their parents don't let go to give them more autonomy or independence. Giving your kids the gift of autonomy, initiative, and industry—drive, independence, imagination—requires trust. You have to trust that the world is safe enough for you to let your kids go at appropriate times. You have to trust your kids so they'll feel they can take off safely when you let them go. And you have to trust that you have taught them to have enough heart, good instincts, and sense to do OK on their own. Simple, right? For many parents, the thought of all this is terrifying.

The New Parenting Playbook is not working. It's no one's fault—it's a cultural problem that snuck up on us unawares. But that doesn't mean it doesn't need fixing. The great thing is it is fixable.

There are other psychological keystones that have cracked in the Digital Age generation:

The Holding Environment

I've already mentioned it, but the theory of Donald Winnicott's (1896–1971) that I think is most applicable to our Digital Age problems is the holding environment.

According to the American Psychological Association

(<https://dictionary.apa.org/holding-environment>), the holding environment is “that aspect of the mother experienced by the infant as the environment that literally—and figuratively, by demonstrating highly focused attention and concern—holds him or her comfortingly during calm states.” In other words, the holding environment is the support and feeling of safety an infant's family—especially the primary caretaker, which is usually the mother—give to that infant. This is done by responding to the infant, holding the infant, even just paying attention to the infant. It includes attending to the infant's needs promptly and fully.

The holding environment extends beyond the caretaker and the family into the community in which a child lives. Children do best when their holding environment writ large is consistent and consistently supportive (but not enabling).

What we see today is an *inconsistent* holding environment—New Parenting Playbook parents and schools rowing in opposite directions. For instance, parents who want their children to succeed at any cost so give them too much help with their schoolwork and interfere with the learning process. Parents who, ironically, both put too much pressure on their kids (“you must get all A's so you get into an Ivy League college”) and protect their kids too much (“how dare you only give my child a B+?”). These Outcome Fever parents are a source of a child's baseline anxiety because they are sending opposite messages from their school. Also, more importantly, as we have said, their love

feels so conditional—that they will only love their child if their child produces the outcomes they want. That is a huge tear in the holding environment.

Locus of Control

“I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.” C.G. Jung

The third psychological principle I want to mention is locus of control. Developed by Julian B. Rotter (1916–2014), locus of control is basically an individual’s perception of their own destiny. People with an internal locus of control feel that they have the ability to control their own futures. People with an external locus of control feel as though fate, luck, or more powerful people are what drive their destiny and there is very little they can do about it.

I can’t explain it any better than Wikipedia:

Internals tend to attribute outcomes of events to their own control. People who have internal locus of control believe that the outcomes of their actions are results of their own abilities. Internals believe that their hard work would lead them to obtain positive outcomes. They also believe that every action has its consequence, which makes them accept the fact that things happen and it depends on them if they want to have control over it or not. Externals attribute outcomes of events to external circumstances. People with an external locus of control tend to believe that the things which happen in their lives are out of their control, and even that their own actions are a result of external factors, such as fate, luck, the influence of powerful others (such as doctors, the police, or government officials) and/or a belief that the world is too complex for one to predict or successfully control its outcomes. Such people tend to blame others rather than themselves for their lives' outcomes.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Locus_of_control

So many children develop an external locus of control and feel powerless because their parents never allow them to do things for themselves. The beauty of doing something for yourself, including facing adversity, is the feeling you get when you overcome the problem and complete the task yourself—in other words, master it. But so many children never have that experience so never acquire the confidence and feeling of mastery that are crucial to learning that they, not other more powerful people or circumstance, can steer their own futures. They never learn the Serenity Prayer—“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” Since everything to them is something they cannot change, they don’t experience too much serenity.

Carl Jung

You may have noticed that this booklet is peppered with quotes from Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Jung was most famous for his writings on extraversion and introversion, archetypes, and the collective unconscious. But, for me, and most important to this discussion, Jung brought the heart and soul into the therapeutic conversation. Of course mental health or illness is related to biology, affected by genes, infectious agents, neurological imbalances, etc. It can be an intellectual problem. But it goes so much deeper than that—so many young people are lost in the search for themselves, their hearts and their souls. So when it comes to collaborating to create change, we have to heal hearts and spirits as well as minds.

Emotional Baggage and the Digital Age

Let’s go back to this Carl Jung quote: *“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the un-lived life of the parent.”*

As mentioned, people of every generation have had emotional struggles, be it trauma, neglect, abandonment, abuse, addiction, damaged self-esteem, or whatever, and these struggles have always

affected how people parent and have had profound, often lifelong, effects on their children. But the Digital Age compounds it all. Here's why:

At a minimum, devices are great distractors. How often are you alone with your thoughts? For a lot of people, they now spend time scrolling on their phones they used to spend thinking about things. At their worst, devices are addictive. Like any addiction, they are an excuse to numb out or avoid painful emotions and real challenges of everyday life that, when overcome, produce internal locus of control. Everyone needs to process experiences; in the case of negative experiences, this can be crucial to getting past them and engendering initiative and strengthening intestinal fortitude.

Avoidance tactics rarely work to heal wounds, as just about any addict in recovery can tell you. In addition, trauma (and I am using this term broadly and psychologically) causes coping behaviors that were created out of necessity when the trauma happened in order to help the victim survive—physically, psychologically, or both. Often these coping behaviors do not work well in adulthood.

One example is a client of mine whose very challenging childhood included a mother who was mentally ill, a father who left, and an emotionally abusive grandmother. Our man, needing to shield himself from all this pain, adopted a “come hell or high water” approach to life, promising himself he'd make a million dollars by age 30, and get out of his way!

He made his money, but alienated all those close to him. When he slowed down enough for his emotions to catch up with him, he was afflicted with anxiety and deep sadness, the very emotions from which he ran all those years ago. His philosophy got him through his difficult childhood but was deeply counterproductive in his adult life. He was compelled to repeat the abandonment and

sadness of his childhood (Freud's Repetition Compulsion—a common problem) as he pushed away his wife and kids. Obviously, his old coping strategy no longer worked.

Trauma doesn't need to happen over an entire childhood to affect you. A wonderful client I had told me this story:

"When I was in sixth grade, I was the smallest kid on the football team, and a couple of those kids had already been bullying me for a couple years. I never told my parents because I didn't want them to worry. So one of those kids, he told me the first day of practice that football players, when they had to pee, they didn't bother going in and taking off all the gear—they just peed in their uniform. So that's what I did."

My guy was sobbing like the story happened that very day.

That's what trauma does: it finds a secret pathway deep into your body, heart, and mind and stays buried there, even if you train yourself to not consciously think about it. It reaches from that dark place and comes out in your relationships, including your relationships with the kids in your life.

So people carry these wounds and outdated coping behaviors with them, and it just so happens that they have to check for texts and emails a hundred times a day and answer everything the second it comes in. They couldn't possibly put their phones down for a few minutes to check in with themselves to see how they're feeling. I'm guessing, if they are avoiding trauma, that if they were to check in, they would be feeling pretty darn bad. So they avoid checking in by focusing on their phone. And, although they get that little dopamine shot every time the phone beeps, big-picture, this probably isn't working very well for them, or, obviously, enriching their parenting.

The Digital Age amplifies these kinds of “blind-spot” problems or any challenging sequelae of negative emotional experiences of childhood. Ironically, although people are communicating all the time on their devices, and they think they are “connected,” they are actually less connected emotionally, which leads to their emotional problems getting worse.

As a result, many parents—from the distracted to the addicted—today haven’t dealt with their issues and are less aware of how they feel. And when a parent hasn’t dealt with their own issues, they are unable to follow their own path—they haven’t come to terms with their life’s journey or who they are. So you have adults who haven’t begun to figure out their own lives or who haven’t found their own “voice” controlling their children’s lives to an unhealthy degree, thus preventing their children from finding their own paths and voices. It truly is the blind leading the blind. Adults without emotionally meaningful lives of their own tend to live through their kids, including the multiple check-ins a day, steering/forcing their kids to do things the kids don’t want to do, snowplowing, and/or helicoptering.

Also, adults who haven’t faced their own issues are generally not very courageous. Yet courage is exactly what parents have to be in order to let their children become more independent and go out in the world. This is especially difficult in the Digital Age, where the world appears to be so scary. So parents follow the New Parenting Playbook, which tells them to not let their children go out in the (scary) world.

Check out the lyrics to “If I Could,” written by Ron Miller, Ken Hirsch, and Marti Sharron and performed by many artists—a beautiful lament about the reality of having to let kids fall. This has

always been a challenge for parents—that song was first recorded in 1988—but now it is even more of a challenge.

Jung also said, “Children are educated by what the grown-up is and not by his talk.” As I said, the greatest predictor of whether or not I will be able to help a kid is the parents’ willingness to change. Often, for the families I help the most, I end up working with the parents more than the child. If you are a parent who is worried about your kids, perhaps one place to start is for you to look at your own issues. You will be amazed at how your issues tie in with your children’s behavior.

So, for instance, someone who was emotionally or physically abused as a child often gets triggered when their child raises their voice and yells. How can you deal with your child when you are experiencing a rush of terror like that? Another example is overly controlling parents. Sometimes people are controlling because their own childhoods were out of control. Common causes were having parents who were addicts, mentally ill, or abusive. If a controlling person gets ahold of the New Parenting Playbook, which is all about controlling everything having to do with your child, you can end up with one miserable kid playing video games in the basement.

If there were issues in your childhood such as lousy parenting, booze, drugs, emotional/physical/sexual violence or other trauma, more subtle emotional abuse, blurred boundaries, bullying, etc., whether you are aware of it or not, these negative experiences have shaped who you are and, in many cases, are shaping who your kids are, too.

If you’ve had bad experiences during any of the Erikson Ages, you’ve probably accommodated your pain by taking it out on yourself and/or others. For example, trust is the first building block: if you did not have sufficiently nurturing caregivers during Erikson’s First Age, then you could struggle to

trust others and/or yourself, no matter how hard you try to work around it. That underlying distrust influences every relationship you have, even with the kids in your life, whether you are a parent, teacher, or coach. Or perhaps you're depressed, or addicted to something, be it booze, drugs, sex, work, exercise, your phone, or subtle self-loathing. Your mind's probably not too serene.

The good news is we can rectify the bad things that were done to us—by facing and understanding them. Unlike the tips we give below, doing this is not easy, and you will almost definitely need professional help, such as a therapist, but for the sake of the kids you care about—not to mention yourself—it may be time to open that can of worms.

It is hard work, but remember the motivator: you want to spare your kids the same kind of pain you went through.

*A fifteen-year-old boy was out of control: weeping, screaming, smoking weed. Deeply learning disabled and unhappy, his only outlet appeared to be the aforementioned "symptoms." His father wasn't having it: "My kid will not be an a**hole!" he literally proclaimed to his wife and me. You can imagine how that went. The child was sent to almost a year of wilderness therapy (to the tune of \$80,000).*

However, the father had not really delved into his own childhood with his dysfunctional parents. He's a very financially successful, insecure fellow who'd never seen the inside of a counselor's office, and therein lay the core of the problem. Prone to pedantic lectures, occasional screaming, guilt trips, and self-pitying "I-can't-handle-this" escapades, it was clear to me that he needed to change before we could help his son.

After countless individual and marital meetings with me, the father was able to see his role in the family and his son's problems. The very behaviors he wanted his son to demonstrate were essentially out of his own reach, particularly when it came to parenting.

It took almost losing his marriage and his son for this man to realize that parents must practice what they preach, and running away from their own issues can prevent parents from doing that. The father has made amends to his son and is working hard to change. Not surprisingly, everyone is doing better.

Change is possible and indescribably rewarding, but it requires a new kind of honesty, because it's going to reveal emotions from which you've been trying to hide, although they still probably complicate your life and cause you great suffering. You put the lid on the worm can for good reasons: it hurt, it was too scary, it was too upsetting. Denial, at times, works. Tread carefully, and find a therapist to help you if it's too much for you to handle alone—which it very well might be, as childhood issues run deep. So don't hesitate: get help.

However, working on your demons gives you confidence and courage, both of which you need as a parent, directly and to model for your child. And facing your own demons also sets a great example for your kids, so much better than the patina of denial, which benefits nobody. Also, as my buddy Carl says, "Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkneses of other people." You will understand your children so much better once you understand yourself. And you will feel so much better for having unloaded that baggage.

What We Can Do Right Now

As I have said, the good news is there are many things we can all do immediately to reduce stress, and the resulting anxiety and depression, in kids' lives. Here are some suggestions on how you can start the process. The beauty of a lot of the things we can do is they are easy to try and need no professional help to do them. There may be times when you will need professional help—and if you think your child is seriously depressed or at risk of hurting themselves or others, you definitely need professional help right now—but in many cases you don't need anything except an honest desire to change things to get started.

Do-Overs Are Possible! The Gift of Remediation

The wonderful thing is there are many simple, free things parents can do to help their kids right now.

One of the easiest things any parent can work on immediately and on their own is that first building block from the Eight Ages: mirroring. It is never—NEVER—too late to mirror. It's as easy as turning your phone off and putting it away, inviting your child to do the same, looking them in the eye, smiling, and having a positive conversation, with them doing most of the talking. Mirror a lot. Do it consistently.

It is very important that you turn off your devices and model that behavior before you ask your kids to do the same— don't proclaim it; do it yourself first. You won't be getting off on the right foot if you hold your kids to a higher standard than you hold yourself.

Also, you are mirroring, not staring.

What you may find when you first start to mirror, especially if your child is older, is you will look your child in the eye, but they cannot return your gaze. What we have found is many kids cannot maintain eye contact. Just keep going—keep looking, keep encouraging them to talk. If you keep at it, one sign that you are making progress is your child will be able to look you in the eye with comfort. That will be a major step forward.

If you suspect that your child lacks confidence because they never successfully completed Ages 2–5, then you can go back and work to give them increasing independence and initiative remedially. Starting can be as easy as giving them household chores to do on their own and building from there—we have more suggestions below. However, you must work on the mirroring for a while first, for without that basic trust that you believe in THEM, NOT IN WHAT THEY ACCOMPLISH, no Eriksonian progress will ensue. Many people will need help—some schools might have the resources for this, or a family therapist—because a lot of this is habit, often unconscious, and it is so easy to fall into old patterns. But it is possible to fix these habits, and it is worth it.

Just keep in mind that change isn't easy for anyone. Remember the adults in your childhood who gave you trust (if you were lucky enough to have had some), who supported your own autonomy, initiative, and sense of industry and purpose. Take lessons from those visceral experiences and internalized wisdom. You will need to take baby steps with yourself and your kids and be patient. You might need to get help, and there is no shame in that.

With kids, especially device-addicted kids, change can be especially tough. You will get nowhere by imposing a long list of new rules. You will get farther by starting with very small steps and by modeling the behaviors you want for your children. So, for instance, if a new policy is dinner together four nights a week, then parents must leave work on time to be home in time for dinner.

Parents must lead the way in turning their phones off during dinner. And parents must tell their children to not check in so much during the day and to save sharing their day for the dinner conversation. Once that becomes a habit, then perhaps you can add some household tasks as well as phoneless and uninterrupted time together on weekends. Build gradually.

Here's what one teacher had to say on family dinners:

Family Dinner. The words alone conjure many different mental images, thoughts, and feelings for people. When I was growing up it meant all family members were present and my mom always "set the table." Childhood friends thought we were fancy because she used cloth napkins, napkin rings, and usually had candles lit. The reality was cloth napkins were cheaper, napkin rings meant you didn't have to fold or iron the napkins, and candles just made the house smell good. She also has a thing for dishes and table linens. To this day if you go to her house, the table is always set for the next meal.

Fast forward to my home and family dinner. I started out trying to be like my mom because I wanted my three children to have fond memories, too. Well, I don't have the panache for setting a table like my mom—and that's ok. Also, I hate to admit it, but things were different when I was a child. My teenage children are busy, my husband works the 4pm–10pm shift, and I'm a kindergarten teacher. Our schedules and needs are different. During the week it's usually just the kids and I or some combination of; during the weekend we strive for at least one meal together. Sometimes it's a full Sunday dinner, other times it's breakfast or lunch. It could be roast chicken and vegetables, or it could be pizza and paper plates. What I have come to realize is the food and dinnerware don't matter. It's the people around the table, at the restaurant, or

in the car eating drive-thru. That is when the memories are made, the heart-to-heart talks happen, and the laughter is spontaneous.

You don't have to exactly duplicate your childhood—just do your best, and it will help.

Protection/Preparation Back in Balance

In a nutshell, parents must bring the protection from harm vs. preparation for adulthood scales back into balance. For New Parenting Playbook parents, that means a lot of catch-up on the preparation-for-adulthood part.

To do this successfully, you have to do four things:

First, you have to consciously and remedially teach emotional skills we all learned by osmosis.

Thankfully, kids crave this structure, freedom, and connection. They are waiting for you to do it!

Secondly, as we've said, you have to model the behaviors you are teaching. It is perhaps the most difficult thing for many parents to do—this is where the going can get really tough! But it is really important. As Jung said, "You are what you do, not what you say you'll do." So, I am afraid, you must do.

We know we are repeating ourselves, but one of the things you must do is you need to model disconnecting from phones. Phones are infinitely useful and part of our lives, but they shouldn't take over our lives. Phones encourage a certain kind of multi-tasking thinking that is great for a lot of things, but we also still need to learn how to deeply focus on something, which phone use does not teach us. And we all need to learn to "power down" by doing [mindless tasks](#) and letting our minds

wander, which is when some of our best ideas come. So use phones appropriately by all means, but it is important that we all have significant time, every day, without them. This might be tough to implement, both with yourself and your family, so, with this, as with all the suggestions in this booklet, start small. Here are a few ideas:

- As we have said, have dinner together as a family as often as you can, and turn phones off. Have a designated place where family members place their shut-off phones as they walk into the kitchen to prepare the meal and then to the table.
- Food preparation and doing the dishes are just the kind of mindless tasks you should give your kids to do. Preparing meals teaches your kids how to feed themselves when they go out on their own. Teaching them how to do dishes helps prevent boo-boos such as the college students who had never done a single dish before college so put dish detergent in a dishwasher and ended up sudsing their whole kitchen! And teaching them how to take care of themselves builds confidence, which reduces anxiety. The key is to do these things with your phones off.
- Don't check in with your kids—and encourage them to check in with you less—by phone during the day so you can save your catching up for the phone-free dinners you have.
- Go for walks with your family. It's a great mindless task, it encourages conversation. But only if you all shut off your phones.

And build from there.

I work with a 14-year-old boy and his family. The boy, like 98% of kids I meet, is addicted to his phone to the tune of at least five hours a day, non-school-related. His mother and father both work

on computers all day long; his father's business is to provide digital networking support for companies.

I was called because his parents were worried about their son. "What's wrong with him?! Is he lazy? Angry? Defiant? On a terrible path?"

Nope. What we all discovered together is he's just addicted to his phone. And, like all addicts, he can and will never be happy until he kicks the addiction.

What we also discovered, unsurprisingly, is so are his parents, and his 12-year-old and nine-year-old sisters. And this family is not unusual: I would estimate that with at least 80% of the families with whom I work, everybody is glued to their screens to a problematic degree.

As Justice Broderick likes to say, "There's no connection and no social-emotional growth on a screen," and that's true for this family. The parents get that now! So they established the following house rules:

1. No devices—for anybody—from when dinner begins for an hour.
2. All devices are again off and placed on the kitchen counter one hour before bedtime.
3. If you violate this rule even once, you lose your devices for a week.

After an initial outburst, protests have subsided, and guess what?! This family of five is connecting and having a pretty good time of it now! It's going to be a long process, because, unlike alcohol or cigarettes, in this day and age is it unrealistic to give up phones entirely, so people have to "take the tiger by the tail" every day and risk falling off the wagon, but they have made a great start.

Thirdly, you have to stop enabling your children. The New Parenting Playbook makes it easy for parents to enable their children. Most people associate enabling with addiction, but enabling happens in a lot of other scenarios as well. It often happens with parents. As Jeffrey Bernstein puts it in this article about adult children⁵, “Enabling is fixing problems for others and doing so in a way that interferes with growth and responsibility. An enabler rushes in and removes the consequence, giving the adult child no reason or opportunity to learn a valuable lesson. When you enable your adult child you are compromising and eroding their independence.” This applies to all children no matter what their age. You must become conscious of your efforts to help: ***Are you empowering your child by giving them tools to learn to do something on their own, or enabling them and taking authority, autonomy, and responsibility away from them?***

Take the now common example that youth athletic coaches encounter all too often. A child is on a team but is not working hard in practice. So the coach cuts their playing time so the child faces some consequences for their lackluster work ethic. The parents are at a game and see that the child’s playing time has been cut. When they ask the coach why and are given the reason, they berate the coach, not only to the coach’s face, but to their child and the school athletic director, principal, and anyone else they can think of in order to get the coach fired for cutting their child’s playing time. A more empowering approach would be to support the coach’s decision with their child and find out why the child wasn’t trying hard. Depending on the answer, the parents could find help for the child, if, say, the child had a physical injury. Or they could tell the child that how much playing time the child gets is totally within the child’s control—they can keep doing what they’re doing and expect the same results, or they can work harder in practice and get more playing time.

What is becoming a classic case of enabling is the 20-something, often a kid who returned home from college for some reason, playing video games in their parents' house for most of every day. And their parents are worried and upset. What I often hear in our initial meeting is "When I was my child's age, I was..." Fill in the blank—some common ones are "married," "pregnant," "had children," "was in grad school," "or well along in a career." I hear it all the time. But when I ask the parent what they are doing to get the child to move on with their lives, I get silence. Sometimes the parent says, "Well, at least he has a job," referring to some low-wage job the kid is doing. But the parent doesn't understand why the child doesn't do more.

The answer is the child doesn't do more because they don't have to. Because they are being enabled. For instance, what is the incentive to get a job, or a more challenging job, when you have no rent and your food and utilities are being paid for?

Think, for a minute, about human nature. There are some self-starters who crave additional responsibility and ask for it. They are the exception. Most people do what is expected of them, and responsibility has to be thrust upon them. Learning how to be responsible is a learned skill. Many people in previous generations got a good start on their adult lives because the general expectation—it probably was never even discussed, it was such a given—was that once a person graduated high school they were supposed to start their own lives, and their parents prepared them for that. That is not the case with these children, whose parents let them stay home indefinitely. Also, these children are often lacking the emotional skills we've talked about in this booklet and are often afraid to go out into the world—so they are not only not motivated to leave, they are motivated to stay. And now their parents are concerned and often unaware of their role in this vicious cycle.

In these cases, much of my work is with the parents. They have to first realize their role and how they have enabled their children—which is news to many of them, because so much of all this is unconscious. Also, importantly, these parents have to understand that they have ceded their authority. They are the parents. It is their house. Therefore, **they** make the rules, not their children. However, often—thanks to the New Parenting Playbook—these children are not adequately prepared to go out on their own. So parents must both remedially teach their children how to accept and handle responsibility and the consequences that follow that responsibility and also provide rules, structure, and the impetus to get their children out in the world. And there have to be consequences—not punishment, consequences—if their child does not comply. So, for instance, if the child dropped out of college, they need to understand the consequences of doing that: they should be required to find a job and pay normal expenses—rent, utilities, and food—so they understand what kind of job they can expect to get without a college education and how far their job’s wages will go.

Remember, you aren’t your kid’s friend—you’re their parent. It’s your job to teach your children some hard lessons.

Keeping all of these things in mind, when thinking about preparing kids for adulthood, you can roughly divide it into three general areas:

Practically: Do your kids know basic cooking and cleaning, so when they go out on their own they know how to take care of themselves? Do they know how to budget and manage their finances, both when they have money and when they don’t? Do they know rudimentary household and car maintenance? It may seem weird to list these things as essential for mental health, but not knowing

how to take care of yourself is stressful, like when some college students called the police a few years ago because there was a mouse in their apartment.⁶

You can immediately start to increase your kids' confidence and reduce their stress levels by teaching them these skills. Make sure phones are off when you are doing this so they can focus on what they are doing, can take advantage of the down time for their brains while they do mindless tasks, and can start and finish in a reasonable amount of time. Not only that, when you do things together with phones off, it gives you time to talk and just be together.

Parents should rethink chores. Instead of them being “chores,” they should be times for teaching and spending some phone-free time together. With that attitude, the younger you start enlisting your kids to help, the better. When your toddler wants to help, let them—in an age-appropriate way, of course. You will be teaching your kids how to take care of themselves; developing good work habits, problem-solving skills, and independence; teaching them that being part of a group brings with it responsibility to the group; teaching them how to relax their minds...who knew that chores would reap such enormous benefits?

Again, start small. Rather than order your unsuspecting teenager to clean the whole house (much though we would like to), just ask them to help you with a single, small task. And then build from there.

Physically: Do your kids understand how to take care of themselves physically? Do they know how to make healthy food choices? Do they know how to shop and cook for themselves? What kind of exercise habits do they have? How much sleep do they get? Do they know how to relax? Statistically speaking, the answer to all of these questions is probably “no.”

According to the CDC, the number of high school students in the national Youth Risk Behavioral Survey who didn't get enough sleep was 72.7%⁷, and only 21.9% met the CDC's guidelines for aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity⁸. What habits do you model for them? The bottom line is when they go out on their own, will they know how to take care of their health and well-being? The importance of a healthy diet, sleep, and exercise are well documented—again, modeling this behavior is critical. For instance (and as we have said), going for a walk (with phones off) can be a great time to stretch your legs, relax, and catch up with your child. Many kids are up until all hours on devices or playing video games; maybe a solution to that is to remove them all from your child's bedroom at a certain time. If your high school student protests, the answer is that they are not regulating their device use themselves so you have to step in for their well-being. And don't fall for the "I-use-my-phone-for-my-alarm" line. You can still buy an alarm clock!

The same applies to amount of sleep: you need to have a discussion with your teenager on the importance of sleep every night—not just catching up on weekends by sleeping until two in the afternoon—and tell them that you are willing to give them the chance to be responsible for getting the required amount of sleep, but if they don't, you'll have to step in because their physical and mental health depends on it.

Emotionally: We have mentioned the 6I's a few times in this booklet: Imagination, Independence, Intestinal Fortitude, Intimacy and Integrity, which combine to form Identity. We can't cover everything in this booklet, but you would be making a great start if you focus on developing the 6I's in your child. There are endless ways to build these skills (and model them!), so we'll only give you a couple of suggestions for each:

Imagination: The best way for your child to develop their imagination is to have unstructured play, including with other kids and excluding their parents. Whether you form an (unstructured) play pod with other families in the neighborhood, hire a teenager to be with your kids outside, have parents switch off watching (from a distance so they are not tempted to interfere), or whatever, we encourage you to find some way to let your kids play, especially outside, without you without worrying yourself to death.

Encourage your child to use their imagination when they are problem solving (which they are doing because you are allowing them to do things on their own—see below).

Independence: Giving children age-appropriate opportunities to do things on their own and increase independence is one of the best ways to prepare them for adulthood. Send the message, “Mom/Dad trust you.” We’ve already touched on this when it comes to household chores, but there are many more arenas in which you can do this.

Intestinal Fortitude:

“Mistakes are, after all, the foundations of truth, and if a man does not know what a thing is, it is at least an increase in knowledge if he knows what it is not.” C.G. Jung

So many kids today are terrified to fail, which leads to a lack of resilience and perseverance. One simple thing you can do to increase these things is to teach your child to embrace failure. They need to learn how to look at failure as a positive so they can pick themselves up when they fail, figure out what went wrong, and try again, maybe using their imagination to try something different. The importance of learning how to fail can’t be over-emphasized. Challenge them to do something difficult (age-appropriate, of course) and let them persevere, even when the going gets tough.

An easy way to get your child to embrace failure is to let them make mistakes or not be good at something:

Justice Broderick publicly tells the story of his granddaughter playing on a “soccer” team when she was five years old. John reports they played a very rigorous three-game schedule, were given fancy uniforms, the whole deal. John and his wife came to watch one Saturday and found that either their granddaughter was the most strategic and effective defender ever, or she was scared of getting kicked in the shins! John guesses it was the latter.

Upon the game’s conclusion, she was given a medal to wear around her neck and a trophy for the shelf. She had literally run from the ball every time.

Think of what this child learned from this regarding mastery, courage, talents, and reward.

I work with a high school hockey team with three beloved, all-bald coaches. On the top of each coach’s head are printed, in succession, the words:

“WE”

“WELCOME”

“MISTAKES”

You don’t need to shave your head, but take it to heart with your kids. And then let them fix the mistakes themselves.

Integrity: There is so much to this point, and it goes to the heart of parenting. But a great start is teaching and modeling the Golden Rule. Think of all the wonderful (and crucial) emotional skills

this simple rule encompasses: it teaches your child to develop empathy, take responsibility for their actions, face consequences (in an age-appropriate way), and make amends, if called for.

Don't forget to model empathy and integrity: Do you gripe about neighbors, your kids' teachers, or coaches? Do you model the Golden Rule? Do you scream at the TV? Do you collaborate with your kids' teachers and coaches or complain about them? Do you understand your own beliefs and have a philosophy of empathy and fair play in all that you do?

Here are some other things you can do:

Help your child to be in the moment: People struggling with anxiety are often worried about something they did in the past or what is coming up in the future. What they don't do is live in the present. We all experience a negative internal dialog where that fault-finding gremlin or tape just keeps looping in our brain. With anxious kids who are judged on their performance, a lot of internal dialogue is dwelling on a past mistake or they're worried they're going to make a mistake. We need to change the tone and content of kids' internal dialog so they can live in the moment.

In my work recently with a Division I men's soccer team, we worked on teammates supporting each other, improving communication, and being vulnerable with each other—because giving a sport your all is a form of vulnerability. So for one session, I had a group of the six sophomores learn a song called "This Magic Moment," which was composed by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman and first recorded in 1960 by The Drifters.

The previous Saturday, the team had defeated their opponent 7-0 in a literally magical performance, their best of the year. I wanted to teach them that that kind of coming together, that kind of ineffable chemistry and focus generates a primal, absolute being in the present moment, and, thus, "magic" happens on the field.

However “in the moment” they might have been during the game, these young men were super ambivalent about learning to sing this song. But they did, and the performance brought the house down with their teammates!

Why? They were vulnerable. Courageous. Intimate. They stuck together (integrity). I taught, and then withdrew; they were independent. The sophomores developed an identity that day, and they went from reluctant to asking me when they could do another one!

One of the best ways to be in the moment more is to identify the “gremlin”—the voice in all our heads that sells us on negativity and low self-esteem. (See Rick Carson’s wonderful book, *Taming Your Gremlin* for more on that.) When you are listening to your gremlin you can’t be in the moment. Admit to your own gremlins—we all have them—and get your kids to talk about theirs.

Phones exacerbate this problem, so turning the phone off is crucial. Try to model and encourage your child to do things that will keep them from playing that negative tape in their heads and give their minds a rest. Some examples of things that engross us, forcing us to live in the moment: Reading. Writing. Learning to play an instrument or playing music with friends. Playing games, indoor or out. Doing puzzles. Focusing hard on a project or hobby. Participating in sports, formal or informal, or after-school programs—for fun, not for résumé building. A lot of people find that cooking/baking, gardening, woodworking, etc., help them stay in the present. Find out what interests your child and go from there.

Volunteer: There is no better way to get out of your own head than by serving others. Help your child find a volunteer opportunity your child would enjoy, whether it’s volunteering at a nonprofit that is of interest or helping a neighbor in need.

Whatever you do on all of these things, take things slowly.

Name the Problem: A First Step Towards Healing

In addition to teaching and modeling, you will also have to do some talking, especially if you have older kids. You simply must acknowledge what is going on and give your child opportunities to talk about what is bothering them.

So the first discussion you should have in your family's healing process is to acknowledge there's a problem. A great place to start is the Overwhelming Tragedy List (OTL)—the cultural problems (what I call the Elephants in the Room) that are causing all of us to be stressed and anxious.

How often do you talk about the Overwhelming Tragedy List? For many people, the answer is never. But that is actually a big part of the problem. We need to name the Elephants in the Room, because that will make them less scary.

Please remember that the OTL has affected you, too, and caused you to parent differently. It wasn't your fault, but it still needs to be acknowledged to your child. So you need to do some soul-searching. How much have you, as a parent, subscribed to the New Parenting Playbook? It wasn't intentional—in fact, for most parents it is totally unconscious. But it needs to be made conscious now if you want to change. Do you model good smartphone use? Did you give your kid a phone at a young age and let them use it as much as they want? How often do you check in with your child during the day? Have you given your child increasing independence and responsibility so they can become their own person? Do you allow your child to fail? Is your child pursuing hobbies or interests, or even a career, of your choosing or their choosing? How often do you step in on their

behalf at school and extra-curricular activities? Honest answers to these types of questions will clue you in as to your role in this.

For many parents, dozens of niggling uncomfortable feelings that they have had over years crystallize into an intelligible form when they read about the Digital Age, and it can be painful. Talk with your spouse, with family, with friends: do some soul-searching and understand your role. Get an idea about how you really feel, deep down, about all this. Ideally, you want both parents to do this together: involve your spouse or ex-spouse and get on the same page. If your parenting partner won't do it, it will be harder, but do it, anyway. As Justice John Broderick, who has spoken to tens of thousands of people about his own family's mental health journey⁹, says, "We got into this mess as a family, so we were going to get out of it as a family, too."

For most parents, the feeling they end up with is guilt. Guilt that they were using the New Parenting Playbook, even though they never intended to hurt their child. Guilt that they had succumbed to Outcome Fever. You might reach a point where you conclude that "I screwed up my child; I must be a terrible parent." Please do not blame yourself—it wasn't your fault. The really good news about all of these problems is they are, to a great extent, fixable, if the parent is willing to do the work.

You shouldn't feel guilty, but you should feel humble. Because humility is the place from which you must come when you have this conversation with your kids. It has to be a conversation, not a lecture: you want to hear your child's honest feelings. You want to listen without judgement, so your child can tell you how they really feel, maybe for the first time, which will take courage on their part as well as yours. And you will only get honest answers when you come from a place of honesty and humility. You have to be authentic and communicate your journey and feelings on this. You have to show your child that you want the truth, not to be protected because they think you can't handle the

truth because you have so much—too much—invested in their lives. Kids can smell inauthenticity from across the globe, never mind a mile away. You need to understand yourself and get rid of those fears that caused you to be afraid to be honest in the past so you can look your child in the eye now and ask them how they truly feel. And get them to tell you, even if it is painful.

In our experience, this conversation has the best chance of going well when it is undergirded by apology. “I have something I’d like to apologize about, when you have time. I’ve thought a lot about this, and I realize that being a kid today is really challenging, way different from when I was a kid.” This is a really special conversation—you are introducing a truly life-or-death topic that probably no one has ever talked about in the child’s life—approach it with humility and treat it as the special conversation it is.

Some tips:

- Think about your children and their ages and how you want to unveil this. Think about the developmental level of your child. A conversation with a high-school student sounds very different from one with a middle-school student.
- Read your child’s body language in addition to listening to what they are saying. You also have to listen carefully to their answers. You would be surprised at how many children lie to their parents simply because they know their parents don’t want to know the truth, often about how miserable they are in the life their parent has chosen for them. You have to break through that, and it can be tough.
- Ask open-ended questions. Ask them how they *feel* about some of these phenomena.
- Do not interrupt, contradict, correct, deny, or get defensive. Just listen quietly. Do not speak until your child has finished speaking. As I said before, this is a conversation, so it goes both

ways. You have asked your kids to participate in this conversation, so resist the urge to talk and give your kids an opportunity to express their opinions and feelings.

- Stop yourself from judging. Just listen. I can't stress enough how important this is.
- And, of course, keep the gizmos off and away.

Usually, after these conversations, it becomes clear that some things need to change. Once you uncover how phones, political rancor, sexting, etc., are affecting you and your family, you can't go back into denial. You need to make a commitment to change things around the house, not as a punishment in any way, but so you can all heal together. Commonly, screen time for everyone in the house needs to be reined in. You have to change work habits, sleep habits, all sorts of habits. And you need to keep talking.

The Gift of a Life

Some things must come completely from the parents. For example, how are you about your child's participation in after-school activities? Did your child pick their activities, or did you? Is your child pretending to like the activity because they know you want them to do it? Do you go to every practice as well as the games? Do you berate coaches and officials?

Here we want you to give both yourself and your child the gift of a life.

Take Julie Lythcott-Haims' advice from *How to Raise an Adult* and stop going to every one of your children's practices, or even every game, and instead do something that interests you or that you enjoy. What would you do for fun or to relax? What do you do to contribute to the collective good in your community? Give yourself the gift of a full life—including fun and relaxation. You will also be giving your child the gift of *their* own life by giving them some much-needed autonomy (by giving

them the relief of doing things without your watching their every move and then the pleasure of telling you how the practice or game went from their perspective over dinner) and modeling for them an important lesson—that adulthood is more than kids and jobs, that it can be relaxing and enjoyable...that it is worth living. Get your own life, and make it a full one!

And, because you are now empowering your children to resolve their own problems and modeling the Golden Rule, if your child is on a team, stop the routine complaining about playing time or berating the coach. Break your Outcome Fever. Separate your enjoyment of watching your kids play from their achievements. And if you enjoy watching them, no matter what the outcome, tell them.

My friend has an 11-year-old who loves tennis. When his child started to really want to learn the game, he said to his son, “I want to tell you four things.” When his son asked him what they were, his response was

1. Have fun.
2. Work hard, do your best, and be a good kid.
3. Treat people the way you want them to treat you.
4. Have fun.

My friend, who is a high-school athletic coach who sends kids to DI schools regularly, doesn't care about his child's résumé or whether he plays DI tennis. He wants his child to love playing tennis and get a valuable lesson or two from playing sports. He is not going to attend his kid's practices. He wants to teach his son that the world is a good place, and you can do great at anything you want if you are a good person and work hard. He wants to teach his son that fun and passion are a big part of the equation.

I suspect some parents reading this will feel like “easier said than done,” if you see sports (or other extracurriculars) as your child’s path to an elite college. If you take a step back, is it possible your child will get less playing time, get overlooked by the coach, and not get recruited for an elite college? Maybe. Or maybe not. This is Outcome Fever talking. Your child has a better chance of excelling at their chosen sport or activity if they are having fun with it and don’t look at it as a job—which many kids do whose parents look at it as a ticket to college. You need to step back and ask yourself why your child is doing this activity. If the answer is to get into some special college, then I would argue that it is your college plans that need to be changed so your child can get the most out of—and learn the most from—their chosen activity. They will be less anxious from all of that pressure. And, actually, they will be much more successful in the long run.

When You Are Above Your Pay Grade

If you feel out of your depth at any point, you need to get help: a pediatrician, guidance counselor, or school principal can be good places to start. Some people, both adults and children, need professional help to get past this. There is no shame in asking for help when you need it. Just remember that you want real help—someone who will help you get at the emotional truth—not someone who will be a “yes” person to you because you are paying the bills.

The [Change Direction initiative](#) is a collection of concerned citizens, nonprofit leaders, and leaders from the private sector who have come together to change the culture about mental health, mental illness, and wellness. The Change Direction initiative talks about the five signs that may indicate a mental illness, or, at the very least, mental distress:

- Uncharacteristic anger, anxiety, agitation, or moodiness.

- Sudden or gradual changes in behavior.
- Change in personal hygiene, substance [and I would add device, video game, and social media] misuse, or other self-destructive behavior.
- Withdrawal and isolation from family and friends.
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, or even suicidal thoughts.

Granted, several of these signs can be found in almost every teenager to some degree. But I am telling you that many, many children truly have one or more of these signs because of the stressors of the Digital Age, and the earlier you face them and deal with them, the better the outcome for your child and family. And if you feel that your child might be in any danger of hurting themselves or others, you need to get help ***right now***. Call your pediatrician. The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.suicideline.org/) is 1-800-273-8255 (en español: 1-888-628-9454; deaf and hard of hearing: 1-800-799-4889) or the [Crisis Text Line](https://www.crisistextline.org/) by texting HOME to 741741. Get help before it is too late!

And, finally, keep doing what we have already mentioned above: keep mirroring. Looking someone in the eye with unconditional love is something anyone can do, anytime. Keep talking—acknowledging the problems is only the first step towards a journey of healing together and being stronger because of it.

We hope this booklet has given you an introduction about both the causes and a few possible first steps towards solutions to the current epidemic in children's stress and anxiety we are all facing today. However, it is just an introduction to explain some basics and get your family started on a better path. It is by no means exhaustive or a replacement for professional help. Please contact your

pediatrician or school counselor or principal for additional support and resources. And if your family is in crisis, please get immediate help.

We wish you and your children all the best.

Jeff Levin Coaching works with individuals, teams, and we work with schools through the Reconnection Project. See more of what we do at jefflevincoaching.com.

Notes

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/yrbs/overview.htm>

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

3 (<https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>)

4

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wisconsin-missinggirl-data/kidnapped-children-make-headlines-but-abduction-is-rare-in-u-s-idUSKCN1P52BJ>

5

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/liking-the-child-you-love/202003/2-ways-get-your-adult-child-pull-their-weight>

6

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201509/declining-student-resilience-serious-problem-colleges>

7 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6703a1.htm>

8 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/su/pdfs/su6901a8-H.pdf>

9 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=SEO---&v=462758291159198>

Here's more information on sleep guidelines for children:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181203080327.htm>

Here's more information on the importance of play:

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/119/1/182>

Here's more information on exercise for children:

<https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseforchildren.html>