

Preteens and Teens from Affluent, Well-Educated Families

Introduction

In her latest book, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation Of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, ©2006), Madeline Levine, Ph.D. presents the latest research on trends and behaviors of preteens and teens from affluent, well-educated families. Her findings are disturbing – a call to action, especially for affluent parents of young children and adolescents, if these prevalent trends are to be addressed.

Summary of Dr. Levine’s research prepared by Karen L. Rancourt.

FACT #1: “America’s newly identified at-risk group is preteens and teens from affluent, well-educated families. In spite of their economic and social advantages, ‘children of affluence’ experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country.”

- A major cause is parents “protecting” their kids from challenges and disappointments
- Kids expect others to “take up the slack” in their lives
- Kids focused on pleasing others and getting their approval, instead figuring out for themselves their talents, skills and interests
- Children of the wealthy and affluent are experiencing disproportionately high levels of emotional problems
 - 30 to 40% of 12- to 18-year-olds from affluent homes experiencing troubling psychological symptoms
 - 10 to 15% of those who suffer from depression eventually commit suicide
 - 22% of girls from financially comfortable homes suffer from clinical depression (3 times national average)
 - Private school girls do not fare any better

FACT #2: “In teen years, who kids hang out with is as important, if not more important, than parents’ influence. In later years parents’ values and influence predominate again, as they did in a child’s earlier years.”

- Teens experiencing high levels of stress more likely to be drawn to other teens with poor values
- Peer groups increasingly endorsing deviant behaviors
- Brain development continues well into 20s; teen brains susceptible to sensation seeking and lack impulse control

FACT #3: “Parents of affluent hesitate more than any other group to seek professional help for their children.”

- Worry about tainting their kids’ academic records
- Parents tend to chalk off problems to “going through a stage”, especially when their kids are getting good grades

FACT #4: “Two main factors behind teens’ emotional problems are achievement pressure and isolation from parents.”

- Achievement pressure often translates into kids who are perfectionists
- Strong relationship between perfectionism and suicide among adolescents who are gifted
- High expectations are positive; problem is when love is experienced as conditional on achievement
- Kids with too many scheduled activities feel shuffled and disconnected and conclude participation and achievement equate to gaining parents’ love
- Parents typically over estimate the amount of time they actually spend with their children
- “Silver spoon syndrome” means kids conclude they rate low on their parents’ “to-do” list
- Families who eat together five or more times a week have kids who are significantly less likely to use drugs, alcohol and tobacco, and have higher grades and less depressive symptoms

FACT #5: “Because money and material objects are plentiful in comfortable homes, they often become the default motivator when parents want to change their children’s behavior.”

- Parents using purchases to change their kids’ behavior is an indication the parents are feeling overwhelmed and ineffective
- Kids need family chores
- Shopping (consuming) gives kids a false sense of mastery, power and control over their lives; a false stress reducer
- Materialism often instills a sense of winners and losers, rather than fortunate and less fortunate
- Materialism, with its emphasis on appearances, keeps already insecure adolescents constantly worried about their clothes, skin and bodies
- Emphasis on materialism keeps kids involved in consumerism as opposed to philanthropy

FACT #6: “Many children from affluent homes have not had enough opportunity to work on their self-management skills because parents are quick to limit their child’s frustration and distress.” (Self-management skills = set of skills that allow children to regulate their internal states as well as their relationships with others.)

- Learning to control impulses means some impulses must be denied
- Learning to delay gratification means kids cannot have everything they want
- The ability to self-manage is a strong indicator of both psychological adjustment and academic achievement
- Children who can love – have a sense of lovability – can set aside their own needs, their own natural greediness, and attend to the needs of someone outside themselves
- Affluent kids are particularly ungenerous when compared to less-affluent kids; and they become even more ungenerous when they get older
- The stuff we buy our kids, the advantages we insist on providing say more about parents' needs than the needs of their children

FACT #7: “Behavioral control is a positive technique (includes being an authority, setting and enforcing boundaries) that helps kids feel in control. Psychological control is a destructive technique (intrudes into a child’s psychological space and attempts to manipulate a child’s thought and feelings via guilt, shame and anxiety) that leaves kids feeling controlled.”

- “My parents would kill me if I did that” is a noble out for kids and they want to be able to use it
- Children know they need help in self-regulation; they welcome it when parents set and monitor limits

FACT #8: “Most of us [as parents] ‘do’ connection well. Connection is how we began our relationship with our children; it is the gratifying part of being a parent. This may be the reason why younger affluent children do not appear to have the disproportionately high rates of emotional problems seen in their preadolescent and adolescent counterparts.”

- The connection part of parenting nurtures us at the same time nurtures our children; it is the “win-win” of effective parenting
- The harder and more crucial part is discipline: parents know it is the right thing to do, but emotionally it is hard