5 Protection versus Suppression

The theme of this chapter is the deepening conflict between protecting our children and smothering them. It is apparent to me that in acting on our increasing and unjustified paranoia about our children's safety from an array of extremely improbable perils, we are ignoring the far, far more probable harm we may be doing to their development as competent, self-sufficient, and successful adults. We are no longer protecting; we are preventing them from taking advantage of a plethora of opportunities to learn through experience.

For many years, I have idealized childcare and education in Scandinavia. During repeated visits, especially to Norway and Sweden, I have been very impressed by their insistence on granting children the freedom to explore, to interact with, and to learn from each other and the environment. When visiting preschools (free and practically mandatory) in Sweden, I was often told, "There is no bad weather, just bad clothing." And, indeed, every child is expected to play outdoors for lengthy periods each day wearing, if need be (often), sturdy and effective foul-weather gear. These play sessions are not managed, and only lightly supervised by adults.

So I was truly saddened to read a recent article describing drastic changes in Norway's official policy on government-run early-childhood education. First, the authors of the article present a thorough review of the relevant empirical literature, which finds widespread support for the idea that risky play can be extremely beneficial for children and acts as a kind of multipurpose vaccine to prepare children for life's vicissitudes. Specifically,

> Other benefits that derive from children's engagement in risky play are the lessons for life that they unconsciously learn while

they practice handling risks. Risky play, as several researchers suggest, helps children enhance their ability to master peril ... children seek out thrills gradually in encounters with progressive risks that allow them to master comfortably the challenges involved ... risky play has an anti-phobic effect on the fears and phobias (such as fear of heights, fear of water, and separation anxiety) ... In spite of these benefits and in the absence of any evidence that Norwegian children are actually at risk from serious injury or abduction, the government has introduced restrictions to assuage parents' growing and irrational anxieties.

The authors then proceed to present the results of a large-scale survey of managers of early-childhood centers, which the vast majority of Norwegian children attend, without cost. The following are remarks made by these managers (all taken from E. B. H. Sandsetter and O. J. Sando, "'We don't allow children to climb trees': How a focus on safety affects Norwegian children's play in early-childhood education and care settings," *American Journal of Play*, **8**, 2016):

- "Climbing in trees is accepted but only up to a certain height and always with adult supervision."
- "We had to remove the swing due to rules regarding the safety zone. A play hut was removed because of the danger of pinches and the lack of a shock absorbing surface."
- "New rules on playground equipment define what is allowed in the institution's outdoor space. More creative equipment voluntarily built by parents, an old boat and ropes between trees, had to be removed ... All outdoor activities must be approved. We have limited possibilities for building nature playgrounds with natural climbing and play equipment."
- "The local authority has removed all trees. Children are not allowed to climb. The major focus on injuries makes parents anxious and afraid of what type of activities their children are involved in, i.e., walking on slippery surfaces. We still do this ... to teach children to handle different surfaces, but we have to consider this carefully and explain a lot to the parents."

- "The younger children can no longer be on the playground when large puddles have formed."
- "Sledding under icy conditions is [now] prohibited."
- "Children get frustrated over being stopped in 'dangerous' play. I'm afraid that this safety focus makes it more unsafe for children. They become less competent in mastering 'difficult' obstacles . . . the safety hysteria has resulted in a lack of physical challenges for children."

This trend is spreading rapidly, particularly among professionally employed parents with small broods of children. In the UK, researchers speak of "cotton wool kids" in describing children who are treated as being so fragile as to need a constant protective wrapping of soft, white cotton. Another study from the UK showed a dramatic decline in the last twenty years in the number of unaccompanied children permitted to cross the street, go to the cinema, or use public transport. Obesity is rapidly increasing, in part because parents consider it too risky to let their children "run around" the neighborhood. Neighborhood play is also discouraged because parents are concerned about children "getting in with the wrong crowd." Clarke notes that parents use toys as the means to compensate children for the withdrawal of freedom. Children forgo exploring their environment (many areas of the home are off-limits as well) in return for richly furnished indoor play.

In the US, the typical "recess" in the school day—designed to allow children to blow off steam in free play—has been eliminated, sharply curtailed, or now subject to adult control and management. These changes were motivated by exaggerated concerns for children getting hurt, teasing, or bullying each other, or getting abducted. Add these concerns to our increasingly litigious culture (true, particularly, in the US) and we find schools managing children's activities, not for their benefit or safety, but to stave off potential lawsuits initiated by overly protective parents.

The growing incidences of child asthma, eczema, celiac disease, and other allergies, as well as autoimmune disorders like diabetes,

are now being blamed on our tendency to shrink-wrap our kids in a too-clean environment. We prevent them being exposed to bacteria-rich and tolerance-inducing dirt, manure, animals, and plants. Amish farm children in the US have far lower incidence of allergies than do non-farm children. Farm children encounter all sorts of generally harmless but immunity-building "bugs" as they carry out their chores. The typical suburban/urban child is "protected" from the need to work, and that includes most chores, which precludes gardening and animal husbandry. But dirt may be good for you!

Scientists explain the phenomenon this way: we are born with an immune system that is in "learning" mode for the first two years of life. The immune system doesn't "know" who its enemies are. If the infant is kept in a hyper-clean bubble, the immune system fails to get programmed. Ideally, as children play outside and with pets, they encounter novel but harmless substances—even those that might lead to an infection—and these prime their immune system so it will learn to sort out harmful bacteria from harmless ones. If the child is "protected" in hyper-clean environments, later, the "unprogrammed" immune system overreacts to things it should simply ignore, like cat dander, eggs, peanuts, or pollen, leading to allergies and asthma. Worse, the nondiscriminating immune system may turn on the body itself, leading to autoimmune disorders; attacking the cells we need to produce insulin (Type 1 diabetes), for example, or hair follicles (alopecia), or even targeting the central nervous system (multiple sclerosis).

> A century ago, more people lived on farms or in the countryside. Antibiotics hadn't been invented yet. Families were larger, and children spent more time outside. Water came straight from wells, lakes, and rivers. Kids running barefoot picked up parasites like hookworms. All these circumstances gave young immune systems a workout, keeping allergy and autoimmune diseases at bay.

Overprotection applies also to the child's emotional development. In school, teachers may be so anxious to protect the child's self-esteem that they shower them with praise and withhold

appropriate negative feedback. Results may be the opposite of what is intended—frequently praised children lose motivation and persistence.

Where parents, historically, used threats of the bogeyman to restrain children's behavior, modern parents go out of their way to eliminate fears of "monsters" and such. Halloween—Dia de Los Muertos or All Souls Day—was, in the recent past, an opportunity for children to experience the supernatural, encounter fear, and take risks. Now, parents in the US acknowledge that Halloween is no longer "scary," recalling fondly the hijinks and excitement of their own unsupervised trick-or-treating. Twenty-first-century parents are reluctant to expose their children to "danger" or anything frightening. As an example, "A mother who took her child on a Halloween hay-ride 'which turned out to be scarier than expected regretted her decision.'" It's no surprise, then, that schools may ban costumes that are bloody or gory, and weapons (plastic!) as accessories. My neighborhood has embraced "trunk-or-treat," where mothers drive their costumed children to the church parking lot and dispense treats from sacks in the trunk of the car. Halloween has become just another occasion for a parent to make his/her child happy by willingly spending money on his/her chosen costume. Appropriately, it is now referred to as the "Orange Christmas."

Trick-or-treating at Halloween also evokes the widespread and irrational fear of child abduction. In the US, parents now take children to the local police station to be fingerprinted "in case." Now I find that *really* scary.

Parents seek to maintain children in a state of innocence and dependency as long as possible. Images of college students going to sleep clutching teddy bears suggests how successful they have been. Parents infantilize their children by overprotecting them and assuming them incapable of handling any challenge. In the interest of keeping children innocent, we are eager "to protect children from dirty words and pornography but not to shelter them from consumer desire." Students may also be protected from scientific information that runs counter

to religious orthodoxy. This may be one reason why, by international standards, students in the US are scientifically illiterate.

Another overprotection opportunity arises when children are engaged in competitive play under an adult's direction. Colleague and mother of two Jennifer Delliskave weighs in:

> One of my biggest pet peeves about kids and playing games/sports is the current "everyone's a winner" philosophy. Case in point: several years ago, I had a birthday party for Liz. We played a couple of party games. At the end of the first game, I gave a prize to the winner. Several of the "losers" started bawling—loudly. I couldn't figure out what had happened. Through sobs, one of them asked me why they didn't all get a prize. When I said, "Because you didn't win," the kid bawled even louder. Shaun (Liz's father) had to go rummage around in a toy box to find little cheap toys to give the losers. They didn't even care what the prize was, they just wanted something. Doesn't teaching kids "everyone's a winner" (giving prizes just for participating) deprive them of learning how to be a "good" loser—how to be gracious? When I was a kid (and I know this applies historically in the USA & Europe), we were taught to congratulate those we lost to, and then figured out how to beat them the next time around—learning from our mistakes. Losing at various games/sports also taught me about my personal strengths and weaknesses (I'm not a professional softball player for a reason).

Jennifer's story suggests that parents are going to great lengths to ensure their child is never treated unfairly. I see this happening in the banker's precision used in allocating presents or rewards in a family with two or more children. Parents should consider two things before committing themselves to the goal of ensuring that their child never gets the short end of the stick. First, the world has sticks of all lengths and that's a lesson children should learn to deal with. Second, a grown-up child may very well accuse a parent, retrospectively, of "favoring" a sibling, and this charge may spring entirely from the individual's character. Some children/people are thin-skinned and readily feel slighted. It's just how they are. Trying to achieve complete equity across

multiple siblings in the distribution of resources—including affection—might make things worse.

What is ironic and truly tragic is that while children of economically successful parents are overindulged—often to their detriment—an intolerable proportion of the world's children are growing up in a kind of living hell. In northern Nigeria, hundreds of children *have* been abducted and "sex trafficking" is a worldwide problem. Living in poverty, many millions of children are suffering the combined horrors of overpopulation, civil war, and terrorism, and a range of attendant health risks. The contrast between our lengthening of childhood (see the Chapter 7 essay "Failure to Launch") and the shrinking childhood in a world torn by suffering and strife is well represented by images of malnourished slave children in Côte d'Ivoire harvesting cocoa beans that will be processed into the chocolates consumed by obese children in the West.

In the following essays, I examine four different aspects of the overprotection crisis.

Nanny Angst

I live in the state of Utah, which ranks near or at the bottom in publicly funded support for daycare. Furthermore, the dominant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), unlike churches in other parts of the country, does not make unused facilities available to daycare providers. Aside from an underlying fiscal conservatism, the failure to support daycare rests on notions of morality and on folk beliefs about child development. A typical homily goes:

> This divine service of motherhood can be rendered only by mothers. It may not be passed to others. Nurses cannot do it; public nurseries cannot do it; hired help cannot do it—only mother ... can give the full needed measure of watchful care.

While the emphasis on children preferentially being cared for by their biological mothers is central to the LDS faith, it seems to me that many Americans share some version of this belief: childcare rendered by anyone other than the biological mother is bound to be less adequate, and the child's prospects, if cared for by someone other than the mother, will be diminished by some degree. The fact that these views persist, in spite of overwhelming evidence that the mother's employment and use of professional childcare are not associated with any measurable diminution in child welfare, suggests that they have deep roots in contemporary US culture. I hope to show that the "mother-knows-best" belief is just that—a belief—and it is not found very often either cross-culturally or historically.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to contrast the view just noted with views or folk models found in other societies. First, all such models incorporate the idea that the entire extended family is responsible for childcare. The preferred caretaker (also referred to as an "allomother") is typically a grandmother or an older, female sibling. Grandmothers are considered especially appropriate caretakers for the newly weaned child, as they provide succor and stability at a time of emotional stress. In Botswana, it "is not uncommon for children to call their mothers '*sisi*' [sister] and their grandmothers 'mother.'" Indeed, scholars have argued that menopause creates a stage in the human lifecycle expressly to enable no-longer-fertile women to devote their remaining lifespan to the care of their grandchildren.

After grandmothers, older sisters are preferred as caretakers. In a comprehensive survey of the ethnographic record, Weisner and Gallimore found that 40 percent of infants and 80 percent of toddlers are cared for primarily by someone other than their mother, most commonly older sisters. No less a personage than Hillary Clinton claimed that she, "like many firstborn children, learned to care for children by baby-sitting my two younger brothers."
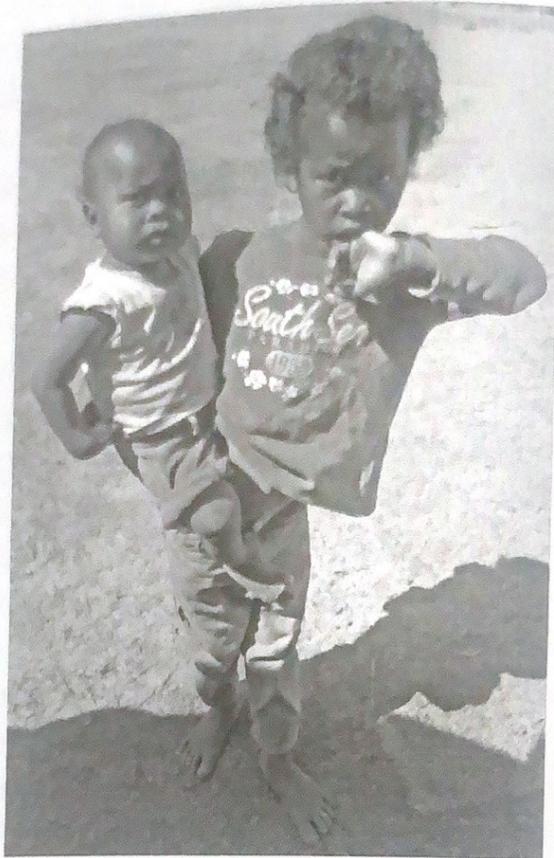
Figure 5.1. Sibling caretaker, Madagascar

While older brothers and fathers are less often involved with childcare, Barry Hewlett has documented some dramatic exceptions, especially among highly egalitarian foraging bands. Several other scholars have documented the great flexibility inherent in allomothering as babies and toddlers are, literally, passed around among extended-family members even for nursing.

Turning now to more complex societies, we see a transition among the upper class, or those who can afford it, from caretaking shared among family members to professional or extra-familial care. The role of wet nurse may well have a claim on the title "world's oldest profession," as indicated by the spectacular tomb of Maia, King Tut's wet nurse, discovered fairly recently. Wet nurses were ubiquitous in ancient civilization. In more recent history, one of the hallmarks of modernization and rise of a large middle class is the greater and greater emancipation of mothers.

sending infants out to nurse was one of the first luxuries women demanded ... experts of the day ... proceeded to advise on how to choose a nurse ... she should be healthy ... of a good disposition, since they believed that the milk somehow contained the nurses' personal traits. One biographer noted that Michelangelo's nurse was a stonecutter's wife, by way of explaining his interest in sculpture.

Wet nurses may have been the first in a parade of caretakers. Sculptures and paintings give us many clues to domestic life in ancient Greek and Roman societies. Graves have yielded thousands of small statuettes of women holding children; these represent the *kourotrophos* or nanny. The *kourotrophos* was preceded by a *nutrix* or wet nurse, and followed by a pedagogue, who protected the older child in public; took him to and from the gymnasium; and taught him proper dress, manners, and demeanor (high-class girls didn't leave the house). All these non-maternal caretakers had complementary roles to play in the child's development.

In the modern era, we can look to Europe, Scandinavia, and Italy, in particular, for a continuation and expansion of the shared-caretaking model. Sweden has perhaps led the way in creating an elaborate, state-supported structure to provide high-quality care, from birth. The child is allocated a fundamental right to the best care available, regardless of the income, time available, competence, and inclinations of its biological parents. This emphasis on quality needs to be noted because, in countries where the government does not impose appropriate standards on daycare providers, children may just be warehoused, and the only "developmentally appropriate learning experiences" are (more likely than not) provided by the television. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that all stay-at-home moms provide the intellectual fertilizer necessary to nurture their child's thought and language to support school-readiness.

In short, it is probably a fair statement that our emphasis in the US on the full-time ministrations of the child's biological mother

is unprecedented in the annals of culture. We should not treat the employment of nannies, grandmas, and daycare centers as unfortunate, but sometimes necessary, deviations from the ideal, but rather as a continuation of childcare practices that have prevailed throughout most of human history. So to those who would lay a guilt trip on working mothers for their use of extra-familial childcare, I say, "back off." Undermining a mother's confidence and well-being through guilt and self-doubt is hardly conducive to creating a psychologically healthy environment in which to raise children.

Child-Proofing versus Tool Using

The argument made in this essay is that not only does much of our anxiety and overprotection of children seem unnecessary, but also we may be "protecting" children from valuable experiences. I will call attention to the striking contrast between how we think about child development compared to our ancestors. Undoubtedly, a key ingredient that makes a creature human (or chimpanzee, for that matter) is tool invention and use. Even though our distant ancestors were tool users, they used a single tool—a rather crude hand ax—virtually unchanged for more than two million years. So, in evolutionary terms, the explosion in toolmaking skill, the variety of useable tools and materials, and so on, occurred fairly recently—during the Middle Paleolithic about 300,000 years ago. From this period, and moving forward, archaeologists have found clues that suggest how children went about the business of becoming toolmakers and tool users. These clues emerge from the study of stone-tool manufacturing sites or "workshops." In these sites, there will be an area where the debris from toolmaking, and various unsuccessful or incomplete tools, lie scattered. Further analysis reveals distinct patterns showing the presence of toolmakers at various levels of expertise. Typically, an expert toolmaker—who provides a live demonstration of skill—is working in the center of the assemblage, perhaps near the open

fire. Close by are the journeyman toolmakers, clearly competent but less expert, their mistakes and imperfect tools more common. At a further remove we can see the remains of children's tool-making efforts. Characteristically, the youngsters are working with poor-quality stone rejected by those more competent. Poorly made blade tools show evidence that the child had gotten the general idea, re tool shape and knapping technique, but "lacked the skill to complete it." This will come with more practice. Two inferences can be drawn from this line of research. First, children were welcomed at toolmaking sites, if they were mature enough to avoid disrupting the work of others. This afforded them ample opportunity to closely observe the experts. Second, it looks like they either found or were given practice material—stone of sub-par quality (which could be sacrificed), but still adequate for exploration and practice.

Another clue to how children become expert tool handlers is quite evident in the behavior of contemporary infants. As evidenced by crib mobiles, stuffed animals, teething toys, bathtub toys, and all manner of "approved" and "safe" objects made available to babies, we clearly recognize their proclivity for exploring and handling objects. Infants grasp objects as soon as they are able and wave them around, bang them on hard surfaces, splash them in water, and, above all, mouth them. This suite of exploratory behaviors is driven by the infant's need to make sense of the environment, and when you're largely immobile and can't see very well, ready access to manipulable objects is a good place to start.

The transition from handling objects, to learning their properties, to using them as tools, is almost imperceptible. It is a short step from exploring objects to attempting to do something with them. In a classic study, Connolly and Dalgleish carefully documented children's mastery of the spoon—perhaps the first tool to be used successfully by a child, at least in our culture. They made video recordings at monthly intervals of children aged twelve to twenty-three months. The skill of using a spoon appears to be built in a broadly similar way by different infants, in that the order in which the problems are addressed is the same. Initially, rudimentary

actions with the spoon are observed; for example, dipping it repeatedly into the dish, banging it on the table, or putting it in and out of the mouth. These simple repetitive actions serve a number of purposes. They provide a means whereby the infant learns something of the mechanical properties of the spoon, and they also anchor the ends of the process. The launch pad is the dish with its food, and the destination is the infant's mouth. Significantly, the child persists at attempting to use the spoon over an extended period, gradually perfecting the skill; but until reaching complete mastery, he receives no reward for his efforts. No food finds its way to his mouth. Therefore it appears the child is *compelled* to master a skill which he sees others in his family using routinely. He seems equipped, by nature, with a suite of complementary motor movements that appear automatically over time. Parenthetically, I would suggest that the conscientious parent will not only ensure the child's nourishment in spite of their inability to feed themselves, but also enable the child to use and practice with the spoon—in spite of the mess entailed. That is, to learn to use tools, children must have opportunities to observe competent tool users and—as noted developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner pointed out— they must be able to practice with real tools.

But do we routinely meet this test? I don't think so. I believe that one consequence of the growing concern (bordering on paranoia, in some cases) for children's safety is that we have "de-tooled" our children's environment. For safety reasons, we have sequestered all the real tools in our homes and substituted wholly inadequate plastic replicas, such as the Black and Decker Junior Drill which can't actually drill anything (but parents are still warned that the toy represents a "choking hazard"). Not neglecting the aspirant cook, toymakers provide "realistic-looking" blenders, mixers, and toasters which can't blend, mix, or toast.

In contrast, my research has turned up a significant number of societies around the globe which not only do not tool-proof their children's environment, but willingly acquiesce when children ask for or take even the most dangerous tools. (The following are

referenced in D. F. Lancy, "'Playing with Knives:' The socialization of self-initiated learners," *Child Development*, **87**, 2016.)

- On Okinawa, an anthropologist describes a four-and-a-half-year-old boy who secured a sickle because "there was no adult around to peel a long stalk of sugar cane . . . so, with expert strokes and handling of the razor-sharp tool, he shaved off the thick, hard skin. By the time his mother arrived on the scene, the child was busily chewing and sucking on a considerable length of the peeled cane."
- Amazonian Matsigenka "three-year-olds frequently practice cutting wood and grass with machetes and knives."
- Amazonian "Parakanã . . . young girls take a big knife and go into the forest in small groups; they cut green palm leaves and . . . weave . . . baskets (peyras)."

Figure 5.2. Matses boy practices chopping wood

The very common practice of permitting children access to real but potentially dangerous tools does not spring from indifference or callousness. On the contrary, these parents understand the child's powerful need to learn from and with the artifacts commonly employed by older community members. They acknowledge the child's need for autonomy so that she can learn the culture and, in particular, the helpful skills that earn the family's approval. Children do so willingly, but at their own pace and in their own way. (Think of the three-year-old angrily declaring "I can do it myself!")

While we've focused on tool using, the "freedom-to-learn" model applies across the spectrum of skill and knowledge. For example, children are extremely knowledgeable about forest products and their uses in medicine, building, basketry, and edibles; but to obtain this knowledge, they must be free to travel in the forest, usually with older siblings looking after and modeling for younger ones. Adults are rarely involved in these bush expeditions beyond giving children a kind of shopping list for products they need.

Now consider a contrasting case arising from our penchant for overprotection. In Christine Gross-Loh's best-selling *Parenting without Borders*, she reports, "I was surprised in the United States when a nine-year-old asked me to butter his bread because he wasn't 'allowed to use a knife,' even a butter knife." While we may exaggerate the danger posed by a butter knife, according to my editor and colleague, Jennifer Delliskave, we grossly underestimate the threats embodied in a young adolescent's access to a smartphone. This tool is easily mastered by young people without instruction. A brief story is in order. An art historian colleague of mine took her mother and fourteen-year-old daughter on a "culture" trip to New York City. The fourteen-year-old begged to be excused from museum visits so that she could remain behind in their hotel room to Instagram and text with her classmates. These were girls who were not actually her friends and seemed not to like her, according to her mom. Aside from being incredibly time-consuming, social media opens the possibility that the jealousy

and rivalry among teens can become virulent and hateful (sexting, cyberbullying) without the checks imposed by the adult oversight available when these conflicts play out in public. It may be worth pointing out that cell phones without apps or text messaging are still available at a fraction of the cost of a smartphone.

My focus on the cross-cultural contrast in attitudes toward children and tools can readily be expanded to include virtually the entire culture. That is, in the village, the child engages directly with objects, processes, and scenarios that are on open display. The village and individual homes haven't been child-proofed. Children show great eagerness to learn and innovate. Their learning and work are usually embedded in a social context of family or peer activity, especially play. By contrast, in our society, the child's entire environment is managed and mediated by adults. Taking initiative, handling "grown-up" stuff, exploring beyond one's backyard, and finding new playmates, only occur "with permission," which is often withheld "for the child's own good." It is no wonder, then, that so many researchers studying modern family life report the complete absence of children's interest in learning on their own or volunteering to help out. On the contrary, "even school-aged children appear helpless, with parents assisting them in simple activities such as getting dressed … and the routine inclusion of chores in children's schedules has generally fallen by the wayside in middle-class family life."

What Price Happiness?

Plumbing the depths of children's desire [is now considered] good parenting.

Some years ago, a US newspaper story caught my attention. Michelle Cossey was arrested in the aftermath of her fourteen-year-old son Dillon's incarceration for planning a Columbine-style school massacre. When asked why she had purchased firearms which enabled Dillon to assemble what police called an

"arsenal of weapons," the mother replied, "He was unhappy." Presumably her solicitation was also responsible for the boy's all-too-evident obesity. The case, fortunately, ended before anyone was killed, unlike the later Sandy Hook massacre.

Mercifully rare, the Cossey case nevertheless signals a problem of national significance—at least in the US—and I'm not referring only to gun deaths or school shootings. Parents' preoccupation with their children's happiness seems to be drawing a tidal wave of unintended consequences in its wake.

The idea that children should be happy and that their unhappiness should alarm their parents is not, by any means, common among the world's societies. After all, children are inarticulate, they are weak, they don't know much, their social status is very low, and they suffer from continual hunger and illness. Why *should* they be happy? As Heather Montgomery reports from her study in a Thai village, there is "no concept of any golden age of childhood . . . children are pitied because . . . they are everybody's *nong* (younger sibling/inferior)." For Ifaluk islanders, conspicuously happy children are a cause for concern and may require chastisement. Children are usually fed last and rarely given toys or presents. During weaning, the child's distress is particularly evident, but its tearful entreaties and tantrums are usually ignored.

Historians note similar sentiments expressed by early writers on childhood. An archbishop in the late Middle Ages promised damnation for parents who might "serve their children like idols!" In the sixteenth century, early childhood was described as a period of unalloyed misery due to high infant mortality, chronic illness, the child's dependency on others, lack of fluent speech, and its inherent sinfulness and general uselessness. However, it should be evident that tearful episodes and bouts of unhappiness inevitably give way to good cheer and mentally healthy adulthood. Indeed, Charles Dickens, in *Dombey and Son* (1848), expresses the widely held view that "childhood, like money, must be shaken and rattled and jostled about a good deal to keep it bright."

Exaggerated concern for the child's happiness is thus a fairly recent idea which seems to be growing apace. Parents who take

Figure 5.3. Pair of children from Papua New Guinea Highlands

their children abroad are quick to discover how thin-skinned they are. Youngsters suffer severe culture shock as they are exposed to the rowdier interactions of their foreign peers. Especially in Japan, children are toughened through rough physical play, endurance training, and mutual teasing, according to US academic Daniel Walsh, whose kids were pushed around but, ultimately, benefited from their encounter with Japanese peers.

I'm not suggesting that children develop best in a state of misery, but our assumption that children's natural state is one of continual bliss, and that any departure from this state requires remediation, has led to a host of unintended but quite damaging consequences. These include the epidemic of child obesity (and accompanying need for blood-pressure medication) brought on by indulging the child with snacks while accommodating their avoidance of active play or the out-of-doors. Heeding the

unhappiness alarm has resulted in a tripling of youth on anti-depressants since 1993, and preschoolers comprise the fastest-growing psychiatric-drug-using demographic in the United States.

Our responsibility for our child's happiness extends well into adolescence, as titles like *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* suggest. And while we readily accept that parents should meddle in their teenagers' social lives, Alexandra Robbins's recent exposé, *The Overachievers*, and reactions to Amy Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, suggest that parents who encourage and facilitate their children's need for achievement are suspect. Even though there's no evidence that high achievers are at risk, Robbins would have us quail at the possibility of the potential emotional damage should these "overachievers" topple from their lofty perches. On US college campuses, personnel—from dorm monitors to faculty to coaches—are besieged by "helicopter" parents flying (or phoning) to the aid of their unhappy and evidently helpless offspring.

In the US, we tolerate mediocre academic performance and rail against teachers who expose our children's failings. Schools in Connecticut have banned teachers from using red ink. Others are encouraging teachers to grade papers in "more pleasant-feeling tones," such as purple. These initiatives are part of a massive campaign to protect children's "fragile" self-esteem, a campaign that persists in spite of overwhelming evidence that, if anything, high self-esteem is associated with academic failure—especially among African-American students. And, more recently, a large-scale study found that students who are indiscriminately praised, and denied accurate feedback on their performance, lose motivation and persistence.

The social cost of inflating self-esteem may be reflected in several recent Cassandra-like reports decrying the poor international standing of US students and the growing gap between the academic achievement of high-school students compared with the requirements of the college curriculum.

I think it is time parents reconsidered their assumptions about children's "natural" state. Should we expect them to wear a permanent smiley face? Might they be better off, especially in the long run, to experience the states of hunger, cold, frustration, failure, and the pain of a scraped knee? Is being "picked last" the same as being bullied? Should their wish list be our shopping list? Must we monitor and strive to adjust their popularity, worry whether their clothes are in fashion, or insist that their teachers acknowledge their "specialness?" Perhaps we might practice a little more "benign neglect." Go ahead; try it. They'll thank you later on.

Turning *Inside Out* Inside Out

Should we take comfort from the blockbuster film *Inside Out*, or is it a prophesy of bad things to come?

Inside Out is one of those films that all my friends—who are more avid movie-goers and review readers than I—insisted, "You must see it." So I did, but only after it was available at the Redbox kiosk. It's not that I dislike animated films, Pixar's in particular, but I had a really bad feeling about this film after reading a couple of reviews and seeing the trailer. This, in spite of the accolades the film had earned: Oscar for "Best Animated Feature" and box-office receipts approaching a billion dollars. My trepidation arose from what, for me, was the central message of the film: "Riley needs to be happy." Aside from her anxious parents—she's an only child—Riley, the film's tween protagonist, is surrounded by a team of emotional bodyguards whose sole occupation is to assure that she is never unhappy.

Before turning the film inside out, I need to set the stage. First, I'm an anthropologist, and as such I don't believe that any human behavior can be understood strictly as a psychological or biological phenomenon. Culture plays a profound role in organizing the way we understand things like a "normal childhood." That is, what is "normal" and "good" in one society may be seen as

aberrant, strange, or even harmful in another society. Our society in particular has been called out as an extremely "weird outlier" and, hence, one of the worst subpopulations one could study for making generalizations about "normal" behavior.

The basic message of the previous essay was that the postmodern society we live in is one of the very few in the world (and in recorded history) that is committed to the idea that children's normal state is happiness, and that any deviation from that state commands intervention.

Our children are free from any responsibility for maintaining the household, caring for younger siblings, or supplementing family resources. These are all part of the routine chore menu for less privileged children in history and around the globe. Corporal punishment—virtually taboo in the West—can, in earlier times and other cultures, be expected following failure to carry out these responsibilities. I could extend this list of threats to a traditional village child's happiness almost indefinitely, but the amazing thing is that anthropologists, sometimes with surprise, consistently report that village children are exuberant, active, playful, and happy.

Trying to vaccinate and protect the child against unhappiness may have negative consequences. For one thing, the more society projects the mandate of perpetually happy children—a complete myth, according to Firestone—the greater the likelihood that even small breaches of this nirvana will provoke unhappiness and even serious mental illness.

Another and very serious threat arising from this obsession with child happiness is thoroughly discussed in Frank Furedi's book *Therapy Culture*. Here is a sampling of his remarkable insights:

- "If children as young as four are seen to be legitimate targets for therapeutic intervention, it is not surprising to hear of a growing demand for expanding such services for babies. In the USA, infant mental health has become an established professional specialization."

- "The belief that there is a deficit of the elementary emotional attributes required for child rearing, and that, therefore, third-party therapeutic intervention is called for in the parent and child relationship, is a widely held assumption of parenting 'experts'" (resulting in a tripling of youth on antidepressants since 1993).

- "Recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury has claimed that therapy was replacing Christianity in Western countries. According to Archbishop Carey, 'Christ the Saviour' is becoming 'Christ the counsellor.'"

- Furedi sees "a decline of an ethos of public responsibility and the sacralisation of self-absorption. Contemporary culture continually promotes the ideal of fulfilling your own needs and the primacy of expressing yourself. Feeling good becomes an end in itself—and the individual relationship to a wider moral or political framework threatens to become an insignificant side issue. Questions of right and wrong become arbitrary matters to a devotee of the cult of feeling. Instead of right and wrong, there are only different ways of feeling about the world."

And now, the film. The action takes place on two stages. First, we see (animated) scenes in which Riley grows from toddlerhood to preteen in the protective care of her middle-class family and lifestyle. For example, at the appropriate age, Riley begins to participate in the almost obligatory organized team sport—in Minnesota this is ice hockey. The second stage is inside Riley's brain. This is an extremely colorful world—in fact, the aesthetic I would describe as Toys "R" Us for five-year-olds or Barbie's Xanadu. And the characters inhabiting this world are of a piece—diminutive, but with relatively large heads and very large eyes. Incidentally, this trait of prolonged juvenile appearance is called "neotony" and is thought to provoke a positive, nurturing response from others.

As I mentioned, the team populating Riley's brain is there to aid in making her happy. Think of them, collectively, as akin to

"snowplow parents" who remove all obstacles and detours in the child's life course. They manage Riley's emotions via a freestanding "console" much like a DJ's (very large) music mixer. JOY is the happiness manager. She is in charge of the console, keeping Riley happy all day long.

The "FEAR" character's main role is to keep Riley safe—constantly on the lookout for potential disasters. FEAR's brief is easily recognized by the growing legion of critics who think parents are overprotective. He is constantly evaluating the possible dangers, pitfalls, and risks involved in Riley's everyday activities. There are very few activities and events that FEAR does not find to be dangerous and possibly fatal.

ANGER feels very passionately about making sure things are fair for Riley. He has a fiery spirit and tends to explode (literally) when things don't go as planned. ANGER also comes to Riley's aid in a hockey game.

DISGUST is highly opinionated and her job is to protect Riley from being polluted by her surroundings, especially her peers. She wants to make sure that people won't taint Riley with their toxic behavior or bad clothing advice. She wants to keep her from being in any situation that's uncool. The role of DISGUST is played in the real world by mothers in Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes*.

More minor characters continue the theme of protecting Riley. Bing Bong is Riley's imaginary friend and, unlike real friends, Bing Bong never competes with Riley, teases her, or says something unkind. He remains innocent, childlike, and safe. The FOR-GETTERS are in charge of removing unnecessary and unpleasant memories from Riley's memory store.

SADNESS is a bit of an anomaly and one wonders what she's good for, as the whole point seems to be to prevent Riley from ever experiencing negative emotions. Fortunately for her, SAD-NESS is redeemed in the end when the team discovers that a soupçon of unhappiness/sadness may actually be good for Riley, helping her through a crisis.

Everything runs according to plan for the first eleven years of Riley's very happy life, but then her father takes a job in San

Francisco. Riley gets her first exposure to cacophonous, gritty urban life. In short, San Francisco is the real world and Riley, having spent the first ten years of her life in a kind of cotton-candy cocoon, is clueless and vulnerable. Her team is acutely aware of Riley's unhappiness, as are her miserable parents. The resolution of Riley's unhappiness crisis involves the team (SAD-NESS, in particular) coaxing her into "seeking help" and "expressing her feelings." This provokes the necessary under-standing and succor from her parents, helping Riley to accept that not feeling happy 24/7 may not be the end of the world. But, just in case, the five Emotion Managers get a larger, more complex console to better help Riley as she copes with many more threats to her happiness quota (e.g. puberty).

As upbeat as the film is, I can take no comfort from its message. Unfortunately, I think it reinforces an unhealthy trend toward increasing children's dependence and vulnerability. This growing paranoia about unhappiness in children may be eroding much of the resiliency, persistence, and toughness that they are endowed with from birth, and which is critical for later success and well-being. I think the movie tries to convey this message at the end with the idea that a little sadness can be healthy, but it is too little and too late to reverse the mostly dysfunctional themes.