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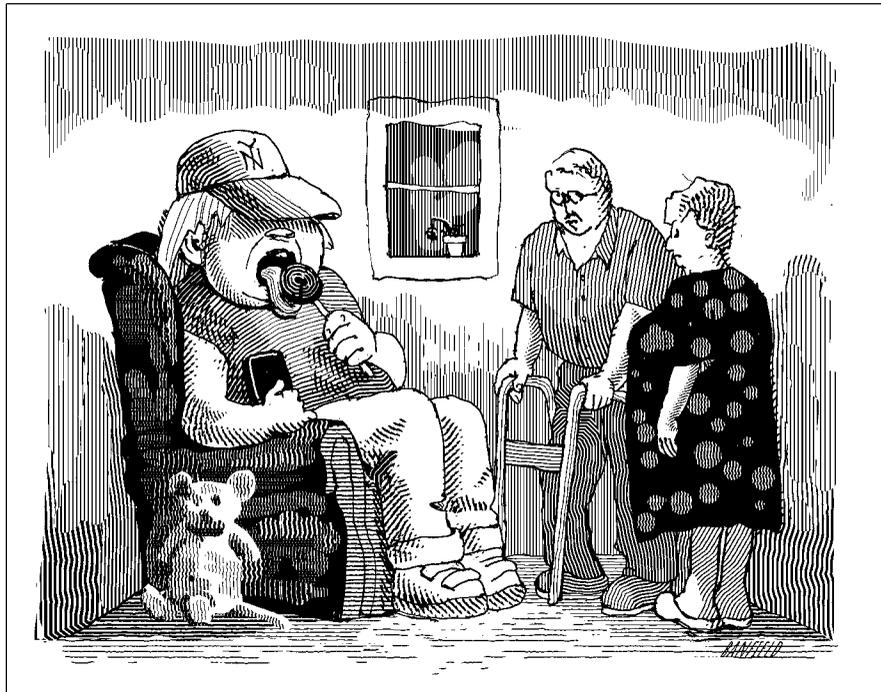
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Book Review by Theodore Dalrymple

BRINGING UP BABY

Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up, by Abigail Shrier.
Sentinel, 320 pages, \$30

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness,
by Jonathan Haidt. Penguin Press, 400 pages, \$30



A DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF CLASSICS recently told me that a fifth of his Ivy-League undergraduate students now claim a psychological or psychiatric reason for their tardiness in submitting their (often plagiarized and second-rate) work. The stress is also purportedly too great for them to take examinations in the time-honored way. This affliction, moreover, was spreading to ever more students. The professor dared not question, much less disregard, the excuses: if he even tried to do so he would become the administration's marked man. The student, after all, is a customer, and the customer is never wrong. No university can afford to alienate its clientele merely for the sake of upholding its standards.

But what is the explanation of this growing fragility among highly privileged young adults? Abigail Shrier and Jonathan Haidt give answers that differ in emphasis but overlap in ways that are neither entirely coincident nor entirely contradictory. In *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up*, Shrier—an intelligent and educated layman, and former opinion columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*—largely blames the psychologization of childhood, such that children are now subject to constant professional or semi-professional inquiry regarding their emotional state. In *The*

Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, Haidt—a psychologist and Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at the New York University Stern School of Business—largely blames the all-consuming presence of social media, which has replaced real socializing with a bogus virtual imitation that unsuits children for life in the non-virtual world. The result is depression and anxiety.

BUT WHEN THINKING ABOUT SUCH matters as the psychological state of mankind, it is as well to recall that our concerns are not unprecedented. From my little library of books about disorders of the past, I pulled out at random Dr. C.W. Saleeby's *Worry: The Disease of the Age*, published in 1907. Saleeby was a well-known eugenicist and latterly an advocate of nudism. In his chapter on "Worry and Sex," Dr. Saleeby writes about advertisers who prey upon the sexual anxieties of the population:

They have sufficient acuteness to observe this peculiar source of worry, and to recognise the importance of worry as a motor force in human action. Accordingly, they set themselves, by every

device that their filthy cunning can conceive, to write advertisements that shall foster, stimulate, and perpetuate this worry to the utmost; and they succeed most abundantly.

It did not require the algorithms of social media companies to manipulate the ambient fears of a generation.

As to anxiety in childhood, Saleeby says of the prevalent Calvinist doctrine in his Edinburgh locale that "[t]he All-seeing eye intent upon the peccadilloes of childhood, the recording angel...the fear of hell, the consciousness of 'sin'—all these furnish effective weapons in the rule of childhood by fear." This sounds rather like the effects of social media on pre-adolescent girls today and serves as a gentle reminder that, in human affairs, there is no entirely new thing under the sun.

In *They Do It with Mirrors*, published in 1952, Agatha Christie has a character say, "I and my brothers were brought up the hard way, Miss Marple, and we weren't encouraged to whine. Soft, that's what the world is nowadays!" When Shrier compares how she was brought up in the 1980s with childrearing today, she says something not entirely different—suggesting that anxieties about current

methods, if they do not spring eternal, are at least not unknown to history.

NEVERTHELESS, IT DOES SEEM THAT children and adolescents today are faced by difficulties and dangers different from anything in even the recent past. Haidt concisely summarizes the problem as follows: children are now overprotected from the real world but *under*-protected from the virtual world. Shrier concentrates on the former, Haidt on the latter—though both acknowledge that each problem exists and is important.

I hope I shall be forgiven if I use my own imperfect childhood as evidence in favor of Shrier's thesis. By the age of six, I was allowed to go to the park with boys three years older than I, where we enjoyed tormenting the uniformed park-keeper and running away from him. There was once a dirty old man—a flasher—in the park; I was extremely proud to be questioned by a policeman about him, though I did not really know what the fuss was about. The flasher's activities did not put an end to our excursions. By the age of ten I was allowed to cross London by public transport on my own, and go to sporting events with a boy of my own age; at 16 I hitchhiked round the country, it not being supposed in those days that either the hitchhiker or the person giving him a ride must be a serial killer.

Nowadays, such a childhood would be impossible. The child would be taken into the protective custody of social services and the parents imprisoned for neglect. Strangers would be scandalized at the criminal insouciance of parents who left a boy so extensively to his own devices. But without training and experience of independence, how is a child going to set out on the ocean of life? The answer is that he or she will be lacking in confidence and fearful of his or her own shadow.

Bringing up children is an art rather than the science many would prefer it to be, given their aversion to risk and intolerance of uncertainty. They want definite and definitive answers, which is why books about parenting, like books about George Washington or Admiral Nelson, never make a loss. There are few precise rules that can be laid down, however, and those few change with fashion, not least because children differ from one another by nature and temperament. Advice can only ever be *grosso modo*, and contestable at that.

Speaking by and large, then, modern childhood seems to me to consist of precocity followed by arrested development. As a society, or even as a civilization, we have lost the sense that life proceeds through stages: the seven ages of man mean nothing to us. One small semantic indication of this is the use, routine throughout both these books, of the word "student" for

anyone in education at whatever age. There is no longer a difference between a pupil (a word that has almost disappeared from the lexicon) and a student. The young once grew gradually into studenthood from pupillage, though the precise age at which they did so could not be laid down any more than the precise height at which a man becomes tall. But that does not mean that there is no difference between a tall and a short man.

At the other end of the life cycle, we are entering the age of the geriatric adolescent or adolescent geriatric, in which more and more people of advanced age refuse to abandon tastes or even modes of dress from their teenage years. Not eternal youth but eternal adolescence is what we hope for now.

AN EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT SEMANTIC problem is the use of the term "mental illness." Here, Shrier is much better than Haidt. While she accepts that there are real psychiatric disturbances in childhood and adolescence, she proposes, in my view correctly, that they are comparatively rare and that other difficulties are not psychiatric in nature. Haidt, by contrast, talks of a "mental health crisis." The problem with this expression is that it suggests a technocratic, medical solution—the opposite of health being illness or disease, to which it is the duty of doctors to seek a cure even if it is conceptually impossible to do so. In the meantime, just as Shrier implies, there will be splendid employment opportunities for an elaborate but ineffectual apparatus of para-medical activity.

To do Haidt justice, however, he is resolutely non-technocratic and indeed commonsensical in his proposed solutions to the so-called crisis. He presents evidence that children became much less happy after the introduction of the smartphone in about 2010. There were many unfavorable trends before this which the smartphone accelerated, including the overprotection of children in the real world and the reluctance to grant them time to occupy themselves in play with their peers.

If anyone had suggested 40 years ago that children should spend up to 16 hours a day, including during lessons at school, absorbed in watching electronic screens (while reducing the time they spent with real human beings), such a person would have been considered mad without further investigation. No one would have thought his suggestion ought to be investigated empirically. But that is the world we have, if not created ourselves, then allowed to develop. And the answer to injuries caused by torture is not to expand the treatment of torture wounds. It is to stop torturing.

Shrier presents abundant evidence that the intrusion of psychology into childhood is

harmful. Austrian satirist Karl Kraus's great dictum, that psychoanalysis is the illness it pretends to cure, remains apt. The rising demand for psychological services in childhood encourages a dialectic between parents ceding authority over their own children and the government or government-adjacent entities assuming that authority. It gives to children the idea that they are made of emotional eggshell, so that some of the most privileged young people the world has ever known cannot read *Pride and Prejudice* without being, or claiming to have been, traumatized. Indeed, the emphasis now placed on children's emotional state sets them up for a kind of arms race to present themselves as more traumatized than thou.

THE ADVENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA—IT would be more accurate, given their effects, to call them *antisocial* media—has accentuated a tendency toward aggrieved, fragile, and hypersensitive narcissism. Haidt draws attention to other harmful effects of social media on the developing brain, such as degraded social skills and shortened attention spans. It is perhaps too early to know whether the damage done is irreparable.

The hearts of both these authors are, in my opinion, in the right place. But both books have their defects. Despite her criticisms of therapy, Shrier gives the impression of writing from an upper-middle-class environment in which paying someone to listen to oneself droning on about one's life and dissatisfactions is as normal and natural as seasonal weather. And oddly enough, her language sometimes manages to descend to the inappropriately and unconvincingly demotic: "Whatever the struggles of their generation, [laboratory director] Evelyn's hires represent the *crème de la crème* of having their shit together." This is both bad and unpleasant writing that surely an editor should have corrected.

Meanwhile, Haidt's book is repetitive and could have been shortened by at least a third. The chapter on the wisdom to be gleaned from various spiritual traditions is startling in its superficiality. When he presents statistics covering whole populations, one longs for disaggregation that might have proved illuminating.

Overall, however, *Bad Therapy* and *The Anxious Generation* are worthwhile books and will probably have a beneficial effect. The sad fact is that a society that does not know how to bring up its children does not know how to live. To this, there is no technical solution—not even books about how to bring up children.

Theodore Dalrymple is a physician and psychiatrist, and a contributing editor of City Journal.

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