

## Comment

**Wimps? What wimps?**

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They arrive the last week of August on college campuses all over the USA. Accompanied by anxious, hovering parents (indeed, the term 'helicopter parents' has entered the lexicon), they spill out of rented vans and SUVs, looking bewildered and much younger than their years. They are the freshmen, the entering university students who are about to experience, for the first time in their lives, the thrill of independence.

Or are they? Increasingly, American college students are going through their four years of higher education - and often years more beyond that - still firmly attached to the parental umbilical cord. It's an invisible umbilical cord - you probably call it a cell phone - but it's an umbilical cord nonetheless. It's not that unusual for some third- and fourth-year students at university to call or text their parents several times a day. Some of these calls are simply to share the most mundane details of their daily lives, but a large number of them are to ask advice on everything from what courses they should be taking to what activities they should join to what they should do about a roommate who snores.

This is completely different from my college experience and, I suspect, the college experience of practically everyone in my generation. True, we didn't have portable communication devices, but I don't think it would have made any difference if we had. We didn't want to be in constant contact with our parents. We went away to college in part so as not to be in constant contact with our parents. What's more - and this is the key point, I think - our parents didn't want to be in constant contact with us. OK, one time when I hadn't phoned home for more than a week to reassure my folks that I was still alive and spending their hard-earned tuition money, when I finally did call, reversing the charges as usual, my father, on being asked by the operator if he would accept a collect call from his son Greg, replied, "I have no son named Greg. I used to have one, but we haven't heard from him in thirty years" and hung up. But that was an extreme situation. The point is, if I had suddenly started phoning home three or four times a day, my mother would have called the university health service to get them to find out what was wrong with me, and my father would have called the campus police to get them to find out who was impersonating their son. And most of their contemporaries would have reacted the same way.

A few years ago psychologist Hara Estroff Marano wrote an article in *Psychology Today* called 'A Nation of Wimps'. (You can find it at on the *Psychology Today* website [<http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/21819>] and I urge you to do so; it's worth reading.) In it she argues that we are in danger of raising a generation of Americans who are unable to think for themselves, who have a distorted view of the world as a dangerous and hypercompetitive place, who are accustomed to playing the system because their parents have bought or finagled special privileges for them throughout their childhood, and whose self-esteem is consequently nowhere near what it should be. Here are a couple of excerpts:

*"Behold the wholly sanitized childhood, without skinned knees or the occasional C in history. "Kids need to feel badly sometimes," says child psychologist David Elkind, professor at Tufts University. "We learn through experience and we learn through bad experiences. Through failure we learn how to cope." Messing up, however, even in the playground, is wildly out of style. Although error and experimentation are the true mothers of success, parents are taking pains to remove failure from the equation..."*

*"No one doubts that there are significant economic forces pushing parents to invest so heavily in their children's outcome from an early age. But taking all the discomfort, disappointment and even the play out of development, especially while increasing pressure for success, turns out to be misguided by just about 180 degrees. With few challenges all their own, kids are unable to forge their creative adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life. That not only makes them risk-averse, it makes them psychologically fragile, riddled with anxiety. In the process they're robbed of identity, meaning and a sense of accomplishment, to say nothing of a shot at real happiness. Forget, too, about perseverance, not simply a moral virtue but a necessary life skill. These turn out to be the spreading psychic fault lines of 21st-century youth. Whether we want to or not, we're on our way to creating a nation of wimps."*

I've taught college freshmen for almost 30 years and, let me tell you, I think for many of our youth that ship has

already sailed. During the past couple of decades, I have seen students on average become less independent and more fearful, indecisive and risk-averse. Many of them have been so suffocated by their parents and so insulated from even the slightest disappointment by well-meaning but ineffectual educators that they are likely to be locked in a state of adolescence for years after they graduate. And because they've never learned how to handle defeat and discouragement, they are also prone to depression and acute anxiety when suddenly confronted by difficulties: in school, in relationships and in life choices.

Now, I don't want to fall into the trap of making over-generalizations, something I think Marano is guilty of in that article. Many students today are well adjusted, capable and independent young men and women. I meet them all the time. What I'm trying to say is that I have noticed an increase in the number who are not, and that increase seems to be correlated with an increase in what I would call overparenting. It's also correlated with a sharp rise in the number of students who are documented to have some sort of learning disability, and who therefore are entitled to - and always request - special accommodations on tests and quizzes. I'm deeply sympathetic to any student with a legitimate difficulty that they are trying to overcome, but I worry that at least some students have been placed into a category in which they don't belong by their parents and educators as a way of helping them do better, and consequently they never develop the confidence in their own abilities that they will need when they face a world that won't make any special accommodations for them whatsoever. So if you allow for the somewhat sensational tone of the article, I think Marano has some important points to make.

Of all the virtues to which I aspire, high on the list would be self-reliance. I take pride in being able to repair computers, fix electrical problems, do basic plumbing and build some of my own furniture. Until cars became rife with anti-pollution devices and overburdened with complex electrical systems, I did a lot of my own automobile work, as did many people of my, and particularly my father's, generation. I like not having to depend on others any more than is absolutely necessary, and I don't mind making mistakes. But I suspect, if Marano is right, that this is one of many respects in which I am about to become as uncommon as a woolly mammoth.

Yet there is one place where, if you want to, you can still find young people who take risks, think for themselves and persevere in the face of numerous setbacks. That place is anywhere you find a junior faculty member in the sciences. We may be about to become a nation of wimps, but the ranks of the instructors and assistant professors constitute a wimp-free zone.

It has become a cliché that, as we get older, we tend to look down on young people as having a much easier time of it than we did. (I've caught myself about to say, to some graduate student complaining about a shortage of pipette-persons, "When I was your age we didn't have pipette-men; we blew our own glass pipettes, and we made the glass from sand as well!") That attitude couldn't be more inappropriate in the case of scientists just starting their academic careers. Beginning investigators have a much more difficult time than we did, in just about every aspect of academic life. It's so much harder to get funding, for one thing. We went through some troughs in federal support for science when I was starting out, but nothing like the doldrums of the past seven years. Competition is fiercer for fellowships, young investigator awards and all the other little things that help make getting one's career going easier. The number of scientists has increased dramatically, but the number of such sources of support has not.

Genomics hasn't made things easier. It's the main reason that biology has become a technology-driven science, which means that, to play at a high level, the cost in equipment alone can be very high. So not only does the aspiring genome biologist have to raise money in an era of tight funding, he or she has to raise more than the average senior faculty member in many other fields.

The bar is also much higher in terms of what is expected in order to gain recognition - and, eventually, tenure. 'Publish or perish' has become 'publish in one of a handful of journals with a high impact factor or perish'. I had the luxury, when I was getting established, of publishing my papers in the places I thought they belonged, which often included highly specialized journals. Heaven help the young biologist who does that now.

Then there are the daily discouragements, which are more numerous, I think, than those we suffered at their age. Because it's harder to get grants today, the average young investigator must endure several rounds, and often years, of failure. Tough enough to get turned down when you've at least had the experience of some success. But to be told repeatedly that your proposal hasn't made the grade when you're just setting off on your own would break many a weaker person. And let's not forget, as I just pointed out, that we are forcing these young people to publish their papers in journals with astronomically high rejection rates, thereby exposing them to regular pummeling from inexperienced editors and misanthropic reviewers.

But, you say, at least they have help from those of us who have already been through the mill. Not necessarily. I know of many institutions where the senior faculty deliberately take a 'hands-off' approach with younger colleagues - a sort of 'sink-or-swim' philosophy that mandates simply observing whether someone has the right stuff to make it

on their own. I believe this distancing is often well intentioned, because inviting a junior faculty member to collaborate can be the kiss of death: at many schools, if an untenured investigator has worked extensively with senior colleagues, when they are brought up for tenure they are tarred with the brush of not really having accomplished anything themselves.

As if that weren't bad enough, I'm not even sure our junior colleagues get enough sympathy from their elders - at least, not in a form that does them much good. At precisely the time they need encouragement, not just about their own work but about the future of profession they are so eagerly trying to join, what they are most apt to hear from us is a litany of complaints about how difficult things are and how bleak that future looks. It's a miracle more of them don't chuck it all and go into a career with better prospects, like selling landline telephones.

So let me offer a few suggestions for things we all could do to make their struggles just a bit easier and their burdens a tad lighter. First and foremost, we should abandon, as a matter of policy, the senseless, haughty and counter-productive belief that they must do everything on their own. Institutions should reward young scientists who collaborate effectively with their senior colleagues for helping to knit departments and programs together, not penalize them for failing to demonstrate some macho-driven concept of 'independence'.

Second, we should be wary of what sort of impression our own carping makes on our young associates. Remember, we are who they want to become, and if they see us as dissatisfied, shrill and constantly frustrated, even the best of them may have second thoughts about getting to where we are. I'm not saying we must give up complaining - at my university that'd be like suggesting that a koala give up eucalyptus leaves. But let's do our complaining to each

other, and remember that one of the most important things we have to give to our junior faculty (and eventual successors) is a sense that this is a life worth living and a career worth fighting for. We have to help them keep hope alive.

Third, we must, as a community, condemn the practice of trashing research proposals from beginning investigators as 'overly ambitious'. I've seen this ploy used frequently and it always makes me furious. Being ambitious is what got us where we are. It's what drives much of the great science. It's a virtue, not a vice. I suspect that, when this charge is made, the reviewer actually doesn't have anything negative to say about the substance of the proposal but is merely trying to assert his or her own superiority. It's inexcusable behavior. If you really think the science is exciting but the investigator has proposed far more than they can do in the time allotted on the grant for the money they have requested, fund the damn thing and let them find out by experience how much can be done in four years. To force them to resubmit an otherwise good proposal just to remove some specific aims gives the impression that their senior colleagues are a bunch of nit-picking, supercilious jerks. Which we probably are, but it's nothing to be proud of.

Finally, we should not forget to express to junior faculty everywhere our sympathy and understanding for what they're going through, and our gratitude that they have chosen to endure it. Because without them, our line would be extinct, and the fire of science would die out. Applaud them for their dedication, aspiration, and above all their fortitude. Because they are anything but a bunch of wimps.

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