

Helicopter Parent, Meet Coddled Kid

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Helicopter Parent, Meet Coddled Adult

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Peanut allergies serve as a metaphor for the process

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In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that "safetyism" is rendering American young people ever more fragile and less resilient. As parents strive to protect their children from every possible danger, no matter how remote — no unsupervised play, no walking or bicycling to school, no trips to the park without a parent present — they are actually making their children ever more vulnerable.

Peanut allergies serve as a metaphor for the process. In the mid-1990s, about four out of a thousand American children under the age of eight had such allergies. But by 2008, that number had more than tripled to 14 out of a thousand. The explanation for that dramatic rise turned out, ironically, to be parental efforts to protect their children from any exposure whatsoever to peanuts or products derived from peanuts just in case they might have or develop an allergy.

Researchers divided up 640 infants considered at high risk of developing peanut allergies into two groups. One group avoided any exposure to peanuts or peanut products. The other group was fed a product like Bamba, the popular peanut-based children's snack in Israel (where peanut allergies are much rarer). By age five, 17 percent of the first group had developed a peanut allergy versus only 3 percent of the group exposed to peanut-based products.

As Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of the best-seller *The Black Swan*, explains, there are many complex systems that are "antifragile," like the human immunological system. But in order to develop their capacities to learn, adapt, and grow to face outside threats, these systems require exposure to stressors and challenges. Without those challenges, the systems atrophy, just as muscles atrophy without exercise and movement. "Neurotically overprotective parents," argues Taleb, "are often hurting us the most."

That overprotectiveness has been coupled with a "concept creep" in the definition of harms — both in terms of the degree of harm from which children must be protected and the type. Parents no longer teach their children, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," and, as a consequence, their children no longer recognize a distinction between physical assault and hurt feelings. (That is not to ignore the magnifier effect of social media on the power to inflict emotional hurt.)

Haidt and Lukianoff's innovation is to link helicopter parents, who seek to protect their offspring from every form of discomfort or unhappiness, to the fear of opposing ideas that permeates on many university campuses today. Student pleas for protection from upsetting ideas on the grounds that the mere presence of those holding such ideas causes them to feel "unsafe," are reinforced by university administrators, acting *in loco parentis*, who countenance every student demand for protection from hurt or fear, and in many cases act prophylactically to protect students against any ideas they deem to "invalidate their experience."

Administrators at Villanova University, for instance, recently added to professor evaluation forms a number of questions related to "diversity and inclusion," including whether the professor demonstrated "cultural awareness" and "created an environment free of bias based on individual difference or social identities." Villanova professors Colleen Sheehan and James Matthew Wilson wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that such "heavily politicized questions" risk imposing "an atmosphere of fear-imposed silence" on professors.

The dictum of the late president of the University of Chicago, Hanna Holborn Gray, "The purpose of education is not to make people comfortable; it is to teach them to think," no longer resonates on many campuses.

A FEW EXAMPLES from recent months provide much fodder for Haidt and Lukianoff's thesis. In February, Yale Law School's Federalist Society invited Kristen Waggoner to speak. Waggoner had successfully represented baker Jack Phillips before the Supreme Court in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, on behalf of Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). ADF is a Christian legal organization devoted to defending the religious liberty rights of traditional Christian believers.

A YLS student group who brand themselves the Outlaws immediately called for a boycott of Waggoner's speech. That call was joined by every identity group of law students, including, sadly, the Jewish Law Students Association. The boycott was soon followed by a list of demands, including steps to make it harder for Yale students or graduates to work for "discriminatory organizations" like ADF. "ADF is a 'hate group' that does not belong on our campus or deserve legitimization," wrote the Outlaws in one email to Dean Heather Gerken.

Gerken thanked the Outlaws for calling her attention to the issue and readily complied with their demands — and then some. She announced that Yale financial assistance to students working in low-paying public interest summer jobs and student loan relief to graduates working in low-paying public sector jobs would be denied if the employer considers "religious creed" or "gender identity" in hiring.

Thus, ADF, a Christian legal organization, which has won nine cases in the U.S. Supreme Court in the past seven years, is deemed by YLS an unfit employer for YLS students and graduates. YLS graduates who decide to work for Agudath Israel of America or the Orthodox Union, it should be noted, would be subject to the same strictures.

Senator Ted Cruz, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and former attorney-general of Texas, wrote to YLS's Dean Gerken, that he intends to open an investigation into YLS's blatant discrimination against Christian students and organizations.

In January, Harvard Law Professor Ronald Sullivan joined the defense team of accused predator Harvey

Weinstein. An undergraduate on-line petition pronounced that decision to be "deeply trauma inducing" and proof that Sullivan doesn't "value the safety of students." The petition called for Sullivan to resign as dean of Winthrop House, an undergraduate residential hall, where he serves as the first black dean of a residential hall in Harvard's history.

Rather than point out to students that, in Sullivan's words, "attorneys are not extensions of their clients," nor do they represent the ideology of the client, Harvard's Office for Assault Prevention and Response urged traumatized students to seek mental health services and doled out hot chocolate at a student protest in front of the main administration building. Rakesh Khurana, dean of Harvard College, announced that he was taking the community's "overall climate" at Winthrop House and communicated to Sullivan that more work must be done to uphold Harvard's commitment to the "well-being of our students." And the dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences termed Sullivan's responses to date as "insufficient."

Throughout, it has been clear that Sullivan, who has secured the release of more indigent clients than any other lawyer in America and who was accused of no personal wrongdoing of any kind, was clearly the defendant as far as Harvard is concerned.

David French, a Harvard Law grad, Christian traditionalist, and former ADF attorney, wrote recently in *National Review* about Sam Abrams, a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, who had the temerity to write in *The New York Times* last October about his research on the ideological bias of college administrators. Those administrators turn out to be the most left-leaning group on campus, with progressives and liberals outnumbering conservatives 12:1.

And it is they who write and enforce campus speech codes and create the campus kangaroo courts, lacking the basic requisites of due process, to police and punish student behavior. (The proliferation of non-academic administrators is also a principal driver of the skyrocketing cost of higher education.)

In response to Abrams's editorial, a student group calling itself the "Diaspora Coalition" sent a series of demands to the administration to "confront how the presence of Sam Abrams . . . affects the safety and well-being of marginalized students." As usual, the threat to safety was left unexplained, other than to say that Abrams had shown hostility to efforts to "dismantle white supremacy and other systems of oppression."

There followed a set of demands, including that Abrams's position be put up to tenure review before a panel of the Diaspora Coalition and at least three professors of color. And that the college apologize for its refusal to protect marginalized students wounded by Abrams's op-ed. Rather than dismiss those demands out of hand, as of this writing, college administrators had already met twice with the Diaspora Coalition.

In loco parentis indeed.

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