

## Generation empty

Marin psychologist Madeline Levine says that driving our kids to succeed is a journey over an emotional cliff.

by Jill Kramer  
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Tomorrow's movers and shakers are emotionally wounded, says psychologist Madeline Levine. An increasing number of well-heeled, driven, high-achieving adolescents are growing up without conscience or community. These are the kids who will be filling classrooms at Harvard and Princeton and who will later be our politicians, policy makers, doctors and lawyers—and that's a problem for all of us.

Levine's new book, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, exposes the ugly side of these smart, stylish teens and their affluent families. They look perfect and appear to have everything; but one in every three is deeply troubled. They're anxious and depressed, they're abusing hard drugs, they're lying and cheating, they're suicidal, self-destructive, desperate and angry.

The conventional wisdom has always been that children raised in affluence are protected from the psychological traumas of lower socioeconomic groups. To highlight the differences, Dr. Suniya Luthar of Columbia University—whose research forms the scientific underpinning of Levine's book—compared the emotional well-being of children in poverty with that of affluent kids. She was surprised to find that the affluent children were more troubled.

Levine has seen both sides of this equation. Her roots are in working-class Queens, New York, and her first career was in inner-city schools that were more like war zones than teaching establishments. But for the last 25 years, she has been treating the privileged children of Marin County in her private psychology practice. She's also raised three sons here. Married to a successful surgeon, she lives in a sprawling wood-shingled home in one of the toniest areas of this highly affluent county. When I arrive at her front door, I'm welcomed inside by her Latina maid.

Levine joins me in her front room where light pours in through long, narrow windows placed high above us near the cathedral ceiling. She still has a trace of a New York accent and an earthy, unassuming manner. She's wearing jeans with a pin-striped navy blouse, shirttails out, a pair of reading glasses on top of her head. Her eyes are close-set, her smile dazzling. As we talk, her youngest son, age 15, passes through on his way to the kitchen, barefoot, with a friend in tow.

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**It seems that your book has struck a nerve.**

I have to tell you, this whole thing has been just extraordinary. The book just came out last month. I've been to New York. I have to go back. I have to go to Chicago and L.A. The *London Times* just bought the serial rights. I don't know who's more surprised, the publisher or me. Perhaps so many kids are running into trouble, and the book just happened to be timed with everybody feeling

impacted in some way. I have the feeling that, if it had been three years ago, it wouldn't have gotten this response.

**One of the main reasons you say kids are unraveling is the pressure to achieve. Parents believe that their kids have to get in to the best schools so they can land the best jobs at the highest salaries. Are they wrong?**

Kids from prestigious schools make marginally more money, on average, than kids who didn't go to prestigious schools. It really becomes delusional to think that these are the things that make for a better quality of life for children. Does it allow your kid to say at a cocktail party, "I went to Princeton"? Yes. But for kids to constantly be pressured has very negative effects on healthy child development. The reality is that there is zero correlation between the school you went to and happiness. If you want your kids to be happy, that has nothing to do with the school.

**Tell me about the population of kids that you're writing about. Who are they, and what are the problems they're having?**

This book looks at kids with a family income of \$120,000 to \$160,000, which in some communities is not even considered affluent. Depression among teenagers in communities like this is three times the general rate of depression for teens. And [the rate of] anxiety disorders is three times the general rate. And substance abuse is substantially higher, and cutting is substantially higher. And 30 to 40 percent of kids are showing "troubling psychological symptoms."

**That statistic really gets me. That's astonishingly high.**

Well, you have 22 percent of girls meeting criteria for clinical depression. I'm not talking about kids who are just "unhappy"—they're depressed! There's a big difference. You would expect 8 percent to be depressed, and we're getting 22 percent instead.

**You say in the book that parents often are unaware of this. But if a kid is a self-mutilator, or as it's called a "cutter," for example, there's physical evidence. You mention in the book a girl who carved the word "empty" into her arm. You'd think a parent would notice something like that.**

Up until the last seven or eight years, these kids were easy to identify. They looked depressed, they were bedraggled, they were withdrawn, they were angry. Their parents were beside themselves when they hauled them into therapy. Over the last few years, I think it is increasingly difficult to recognize that these are kids who are in trouble. They come in, [the girls are] made up, they drive up in a good car, they have very good social skills—"Hi, Dr. Levine, it's a pleasure to meet you"—they look you right in the eye. So at first blush, it's kind of like, "what are you doing here?" And that's why that cutter story, for me, was the "aha!" story. Because she was wearing this very expensive T-shirt, Prada or something, and underneath she's carved "**empty**" into her arm. So, on the surface, she looks terrific. But she's bleeding underneath. And that became a metaphor for me, for the kids that I was seeing. The surfaces of everything in these communities look good. The houses look good, the women are well-groomed, the lawns are done. But the substance of things has become really impaired. And these kids still are maintaining their grades. The old saw about depression was "watch for a drop in your kid's grades." Now I'm seeing kids addicted to cocaine and they're number one in their class. They party all night, they use cocaine and they stay up and study. So now, when parents call me up, they say, "I don't think there's anything really wrong with my kid, but would you just take a look at her?" This was unheard of 15 years ago.

### **So what tips off the parent when a kid seems to be doing okay?**

I think parents intuitively have a really good sense about their children.

### **If they're paying attention.**

I think parents are paying attention, but we all live in this “culture of affluence,” where stuff matters more than connection, competition matters more than cooperation, and individuality matters more than reciprocity. There was an incident of cheating on the SAT at one of the schools here where the scores of hundreds of kids were thrown out. And the school really didn't do anything. And many of the kids who cheated went on to some of the best schools. Their judgment was completely clouded by the need to be competitive. They're willing to cheat, knowing there's a risk that scores for everybody else in that room will be tossed out. So what are you paying attention to? How they look? How competitive they are? Or that they don't clean up their dishes and they don't treat their parents with respect?

### **And the kids probably have the same values as their parents, so the parents wouldn't see this as a warning sign.**

That's right. That's really the book that needs to be written, but there's no research yet. The woman [Dr. Suniya Luthar] who has done most of the research on affluent kids is from Columbia University and she's now turning her attention to the mothers. And I am certain, after living in this community for 20 years, that you will find the same elevated rates of depression and substance abuse among the moms that you're finding among the kids. She's looked at kids around the country and keeps coming up with very consistent findings on these exaggerated rates of emotional problems.

### **You tell a story in the book of your own “worst parenting moment.”**

It really was. It was just awful of me. I'm right in the middle of writing this book, telling parents to “see the child in front of you,” and there I am, screaming at my son about a grade! And this is the most sweet-tempered child imaginable. So I really had to think about what happened. And I think what it was, for me, who lost a parent early, and my family was on assistance—I come from a very working-class-to-lower-class background—I found language skills were my way out. Language skills got me through school and got me my scholarships and all that. So here I was, screaming at my kid about his English grade slipping. Well, that's my thing. That's my history. He didn't lose a father. He didn't have to work in order to be able to go to school. But every time our own story becomes so powerful that we can't see the kid in front of us, I think that's when we're not very good at parenting. So he doesn't have strong verbal skills, but that's not a problem for him because he's a visual-spatial kid. He taught himself CAD drawing!

### **Well, parents of any socio-economic level will tend to project their own histories onto their kids.**

Sure. But affluent parents are so anxious about their kids being able to maintain their lifestyle. Will my kids live like this [looking around at her architecturally grand sitting room]? My whole house [where I grew up] could have fit in this entrance here. Will my kids live in a house like this? I don't know. Probably not. Does it matter? Now, at age 57, I know it doesn't matter. When I was younger, I probably thought it mattered a heck of a lot more.

### **What happens 10 years from now to the 30 to 40 percent of kids from these families that are troubled? Do they grow out of it?**

Nobody knows. Is this a new phenomenon? It hasn't been studied yet. But the way this research

came about was that Dr. Luthar is one of the country's foremost experts in poverty. So as she's looking at kids in poverty she decides to compare them with affluent kids, thinking it's going to highlight the problems of the kids in poverty. And she found in her first study and her second study and her third study that the affluent kids looked *worse!*

### **Worse in what areas?**

Depression. Anxiety disorders. Substance abuse. Psychosomatic disorders. They feel less connected to their parents than kids in poverty.

### **That really surprised me. You're comparing affluent kids to kids who are being raised by single mothers who are working two jobs and are never home.**

When my dad died and my mom was working two jobs, I felt like we were in it together. I was incredibly connected to her. And like I mention in the book, one of my patients once said to me, "My mom is everywhere and nowhere." Being around is not the same as being connected. Being connected is a whole other level of emotional availability. It has nothing to do with how many games you attend. Another thing that the research shows is that affluent boys endorse delinquent behavior at the same rate as boys in poverty—meaning that they're just as likely to say, "I'm going to drink and drive, there are no rules for me, it's okay to steal from my local 7-11." Now the kid in poverty may be more likely to act on that, but I think this is what we're seeing as entitlement. These kids feel like they don't have to play by the rules. They endorse anti-social values.

### **It sounds like they're angry.**

Absolutely. I think it does. I think these kids are astoundingly angry. And I think it's because the very people who are supposed to love them the most are the ones who make their love conditional on performance. There's a woman I'm seeing in my practice whose husband is going to leave her unless she makes a certain amount of money at her job. This is a woman who makes an enormous salary. Very, very successful. And her husband says, "if you don't keep making that \$800,000, I'm outta here."

### **My God!**

But it's not that different from the kids I see who say, "I can't go home because I got a C. My mom's going to have a heart attack." There's this tremendous over-reaction. And these parents mean well. I think that a lot of this comes from anxiety. I used to work with younger children as a school consultant, and I once held this one kid back from kindergarten when he was in pre-school. He was just young, he needed a year more to cook, there was nothing wrong with him. And the father came in screaming at me—how the hell did I expect his son to get into Harvard medical school if I was holding him back in pre-school? Now, it's easy to say this guy is just a jerk. But on another level, he's just scared to death about his child's future and he thinks I'm screwing it up.

### **What are you seeing in the family backgrounds of the parents of these kids? Any patterns?**

A lot of them didn't have good models of parenting because of the high divorce rate. A lot of them were on their own as kids. And I'm finding a lot of sexual abuse among the moms.

### **They were sexually abused as kids?**

Yeah. Now, remember, I'm a psychologist, so I see people who have had troubles. But I'm guessing there is a higher level of trauma and loss in the backgrounds of these women—and some combination of narcissism and masochism. So, on the one hand they take incredibly good care of

themselves and on the other hand, they subject themselves to unbelievable levels of control by their husbands. I see women who have to report to their husbands every item they have bought, right down to their tampons. These are very capable, competent women, but something is going on where they let themselves be treated poorly by their husbands, and by their children. I hope that when there's more research done, we'll have a better sense of what it is. I think that moms need a compassionate voice. I think they tend to be treated as spoiled and self-centered, and a lot of what we hear when we're pitching this book is, these women should be on their knees with gratitude for how easy they have it. And it just isn't true.

**Well, I can see why a lot of people wouldn't be willing to feel sorry for these women. But I think that we're all going to be affected by the kind of adults these kids grow up to be.**

Yes, these are the people who are going to take care of you and me. It's out of these kids that the lawyers and the doctors and the policy-makers and the CEOs are more likely to come, because their parents have money and connections. So it's really a bigger social issue. I'm hoping that the doctor who takes care of me in 15 years isn't the kid who cheated and felt that was perfectly fine. I want somebody who's compassionate, who cares about people. And I think that the kids who push their way to the top have issues of conscience that are of concern to me. They believe that it's every man for himself and in order for you to win, somebody else has to lose.

**I think we've already seen a lot of this in scandals like Enron.**

That's exactly right. And that's why you can't say this is brand new. It may have been around for the last 200 years and it was just undocumented. Maybe it was there all along and that's why we have Enron and President Bush! I know kids who have lied, cheated, stolen, been picked up for all kinds of misdemeanors and even felonies and still get admitted to some of the best schools in this country.

**Tell me about your background. Where did you grow up?**

In Queens. It was a working-class neighborhood, doors open. You couldn't buy your way out of trouble so you needed your neighbor to help you out if you were sick or you needed a cup of sugar or whatever. My mom was a housewife and my father was a cop. A Jewish cop.

**There aren't a lot of those! When you were a kid, what did you imagine you would be doing when you grew up? Did you think you would have a career?**

The notion of being a doctor or a Ph.D. didn't even cross my mind until I was well into my 20s. People in my family were truck drivers, most of the women didn't work. But I was always smart in school, so I thought that meant I was going to be a teacher or a social worker—both of which I was. And one day my supervisor at Mount Sinai Hospital—I was working in the Department of Psychiatry—she called me and said, "I want you to go back to school and get a Ph.D." But I was a terrible teacher.

**Really!**

I worked in the South Bronx. They've made movies about this place—*Fort Apache*, with Paul Newman.

**What grade did you teach?**

For several years I taught junior high school and I also taught high school. And I was just awful. But what I liked was going home with the kids and meeting their families. I was really good at talking with the parents and the kids.

### **Why weren't you good at teaching?**

There was no teaching going on in those schools. Our school was so violent that, rather than call for an ambulance every day, the city just gave us our own ambulance. Every day somebody was injured, badly. What I ended up doing was I'd make friends with a couple of the boys who were left back so many times they were 22 years old and still in high school, and I'd promise to pass them if they made sure I got from my car to the school safely. I used to have kids having sex in the coat closet. I'd be taking knives away from kids. It was horrible.

### **Where did you go to school?**

My husband had a fellowship in California so we came out here and I ended up going to California School of Professional Psychology for my Ph.D. So I've been to Columbia and I've been to the California School of Professional Psychology and I've been to the State University of New York at Buffalo and probably the best education I got was at University of Buffalo. Better than Columbia. I was an English major and I used to hang out with Leonard Cohen there. Robert Haas, who became the poet laureate of the United States, taught several of my classes. Allen Ginsberg was there and Leslie Fiedler—it was a very exciting time. So I really don't have strong feelings about where my kids go to school because it really doesn't matter. Now, if I said to one of my parents, "you know I think Santa Cruz is just as good as Stanford," they'd be outraged. But it depends on what you're interested in. What's the best school for my child? It depends on the kind of person he is. Even my agent, who I adore, he had one young child and his wife was pregnant with the other and he says to me, "Now I know I'm not supposed to ask this, but we're trying to decide between two schools—one is very rigid and academic and the other is kind of a hippie school—what do you think would be better for my two kids?" The kid's not born yet! [laughs] And he's the smartest guy I know!

### **It's amazing that this kind of thinking is so ingrained and so widespread.**

I actually believe that, if you can convince parents that this is harmful—if you can speak compassionately enough, with enough understanding of the anxiety that they face and stand in their shoes—I think you can get people to change their point of view. You know, we picketed Safeway when we thought Alar on apples was bad for our kids. When you can galvanize moms that their kids are really at risk, I think you have a good shot at having people re-think their priorities. But, for the most part, I think we've been schooled to think that our kids are at risk if we don't act this way.