‘Coddling of the American Mind’: Parents raising children to be fragile

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer, Posted: September 28, 2018

In June 2017, Chief Justice John Roberts of the U.S. Supreme Court concluded a commencement speech at his son's middle school by predicting that "whether I wish these things or not," the graduates would experience betrayal, loneliness, bad luck, and pain. Those willing and able to learn from "messages in misfortune," he added, would be far more likely to be better citizens and better people.

Greg Lukianoff (a lawyer, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and author of *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*) and Jonathan Haidt (a professor of ethical leadership at NYU's School of Business and author of *The Righteous Mind* and *The Happiness Hypothesis*) share the chief justice's concerns about "safetyism." By overprotecting their children, they claim, parents have taught the current generation of teenagers and young adults to engage in dichotomous thinking; amplify their emotional responses, anxiety, and depression; and exaggerate the dangers they face.
In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Lukianoff and Haidt connect these child-rearing patterns to disturbing developments on college campuses. Administrators, they argue, increasingly tolerate or encourage evaluations of speech in terms of its impact on the feelings of individuals and groups, and they sometimes acquiesce to demands to disinvite or silence "insensitive" or "hateful" speakers.

*The Coddling of the American Mind* is an informative and provocative examination of social problems that should concern all of us: the emotional well-being of young people; the impact of political polarization, identity politics, and social media; free speech and academic freedom.

The authors emphasize the "lasting adverse impacts" (including recourse to confirmation bias and common-enemy tribalism) of well-intentioned decisions to define trauma as anything "experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful," and of microaggressions as intentional or unintentional slights.

Lukianoff and Haidt endorse "anti-fragility" parenting, governed by the proposition that the child "should be prepared for the road, not the road for the child." Convinced that kids need to learn how to respond to everyday irritations and provocations, and that risk-deprivation breeds risk-aversion, they recommend that young children engage in unsupervised play and unaccompanied walks in the neighborhood. They advise parents to limit their children's screen time, and to encourage face-to-face contact and "productive disagreements" with peers and adults.

Universities, the authors indicate, should renew commitments to free speech, stick with them, and (to avoid ideological uniformity) promote "viewpoint diversity" in recruiting faculty. Above all, they should not confuse their responsibility to provide physical safety with the less desirable goal of keeping students emotionally or ideologically "safe."

These initiatives, the authors conclude, can help students "see themselves not as fragile candles, but as fires, welcoming the wind" by engaging with ideologically diverse and even hostile speakers and ideas.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Posted: September 28, 2018 - 10:00 AM
Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer