



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on May 10, 2024

The Stealth Reason College Kids Are So Miserable

The Wall Street Journal reports that today's college students are so lonely, sad and socially anxious that they grab their dining hall food to go — preferring to eat in their rooms.

Time spent in dining halls is down 40%, according to Degree Analytics, a company measuring students' time spent where on campus. Attendance at sporting events, clubs and even dorm meetings is down, too. The Journal quotes one residential adviser who said several students asked to attend her meeting by Zoom, even though they were down the hall.



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The story documents classroom changes, too — and not just at the fancy colleges. The changes include more students handing in half-finished assignments. These same students are then shocked when they get failing grades. Look, I tried, they'll tell their professors.

Where's my participation trophy?

Props to reporter Douglas Belkin and assistant Harry Carr for gleaning so many granular examples of a generation that seems to have arrived on campus undercooked. The authors found that at Wesleyan University, student government meetings used to begin with a walk around campus. Today, they still take a walk, but they hold onto a shared rope, preschool style.

It's no surprise that mental health on campus is reportedly decreasing. One in seven students has considered suicide this past year, according to a Healthy Minds study cited by the Journal. In fact, so many students are demanding therapy that hundreds of colleges have contracted with a telehealth company that promises to find students a therapist within five minutes of their call.

Experts are debating the cause of all this misery, and there are plenty of potential culprits: COVID-19 closures, political extremism, even the advent of the "like" button. But could one unnoticed factor be that this generation spent so little time unsupervised as kids?

A recent University of Michigan study found that the majority of parents of kids ages 9 to 11 will not let them walk to a friend's house, play at the park with a friend, or trick-or-treat unchaperoned. Only half will let their kids go to another aisle at the store by themselves.

It's easy to see how a generation never allowed to play, walk around the neighborhood, or even drift over to the dairy section without anxious adults watching and assisting them might just be unprepared for the real world — or even eating in the dining hall.

And what about the fact that most college kids today grew up with cellphones? I'm not talking about TikTok. I'm talking about the fact that nowadays when a kid's bike chain falls off, they can instantly call Dad to come fix it. It's the same thing with their grades; teachers tell me kids are texting their parents from the school bathroom. The parents then turn around and call the school.



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When kids play unsupervised with other kids of different ages, they learn important skills: creativity, communication, compromise, compassion and leadership. When they successfully complete tasks on their own, they understand they are helpful, capable and resourceful — not babies.

When young people miss out on those experiences as kids, it's no surprise they'd arrive on campus socially awkward, afraid and maybe even disliking themselves for being so unformed.

Until we give kids back some independence to run around and play, they will arrive on campus unprepared, clinging to the rope like a toddler, because that's how they have been treated all their lives.

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