



## Equipping teenagers with coping skills for the years ahead

By Michael Hawton, Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

The issue of how to develop emotional hardiness in children has become an area of much interest in recent times. Added to this, none of us wants to be seen to be just standing by or letting our child go through emotional pain

unnecessarily. It's quite natural for a caring parent to want to step in to release the distress that accompanies any child's feelings of being treated unfairly. But, this compulsion to act, doesn't mean that we *should* always step in.

In their book on how parents have become overprotective, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt and Luckianoff (2018) say that the strengthening of a teenager's mental well-being may have something to do with how we facilitate a young person's experiences for 'life's' problem-solving episodes, including how *they* can be coached to engage with these problems, independently.

Luckianoff says, "In many respects our lives are better as a result of huge advances in safety and technology. Our lives are more comfortable, which is good. But that gives us problems of progress. We recoil violently from discomfort." (Luckianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind* 2018).

Some long-term studies have been reflecting downturns in teenager's capacity to manage problems, independently. Compared to the 1960s, the levels of their ability to resolve issues for him/herself - called our internal 'locus of control' - has been steadily decreasing. A strong *internal* locus of control correlates with a belief, "I can control my own destiny." Without a healthy sense of internal locus of control, children can feel powerless and overwhelmed. According to Stixrud and Johnson (Reference to complete), the recent increases in childhood anxiety are a symptom of this phenomenon. They note that there has been an 80 percent rise in young people with an external locus of control (the belief that destiny is determined by external factors). The good news about external locus of control is that (the belief that other people or chance have control of me) can be shifted.

### **Are parents afraid of being judged and therefore falling into 'appearances parenting'?**

Here's what I think. I have been observing parents for over 30 years and what I have noticed is an increase in parents feeling judged by other parents and an increase in what I term 'appearances parenting', which is a term I use to describe parents doing things for appearances sake. In this model

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of parenting we, as parents, can feel derelict or judged by others if we don't act. In my opinion, this model of parenting has become quite fashionable in Australia – parents doing things for appearances sake – such as not correcting their teenager in public because they want to appear cool (everything in our house is wonderful all the time) or because they want to appear responsive to their child's needs (such as when a parent caves-in to a teenager's whinging (after the teenager says she doesn't want to go to school)).

So, what I have seen, increasingly, are parents wanting to do something for appearances-sake. That perception of wanting to appear to be doing something (and our vulnerability to the judgement of others) if we don't hold-the-line about for what we think is the right thing to do and be compelling.

Routinely giving your teenager a 'get-out-of-jail-card' and protecting them from all this distress is a sub-optimal solution and it can backfire when they do eventually have to face adversity. That said, there is much parents can do to resolve problems that arise from time to time, without prematurely stepping in or indeed failing to step in when you should.

In the next few articles in this series, we'll be looking at just that matter; we'll explore how you can help your teenager be more self-driven in the face of adversity.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

#### References:

Haidt and Luckianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Great Britain, (2018).