

Growing Up Without Resistance

On Education, Parenting, and the Paradox of Protection

A reflection by

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Introduction

Anyone who works in schools, or has anything to do with them, will probably recognize the examples below. Not because they are exceptional, but precisely because they have become so ordinary. They are not proof that “today’s parents”, “today’s students” or “today’s schools” are falling short. They are symptoms of something systemic, something woven deep into the thinking, feeling and acting of everyone involved in education.

This school year, education will truly be tailored to every individual, the school leadership swears. The teachers nod politely. Nothing changes.

Jim’s father is threatening to take the school to court over a dispute about whether his son should move up a year. He has by now consulted a lawyer.

Rosa’s mother has just sent a lengthy complaint email arguing that the school provides no support for her daughters self-diagnosed dyslexia and is failing to deliver the tailored learning promised at the open day.

Fiona is absent right before her test. Her mother has called her in sick again. An hour earlier Fiona was doing perfectly fine. Her absence rate is sky-high, and the days off always seem to fall suspiciously conveniently.

Ibrahim has to stay behind after school because, for the umpteenth time, he has not done his homework. Ibrahim’s parents do not believe in punishment and complain to the team leader, who gives in to their demand, not because it is the better course, but to avoid further hassle.

Boris is slumped over his desk during the first lesson of the day. He gamed until four in the morning. When his teacher asks about it, Boris just shrugs. His parents either did not notice or did not step in; it is not entirely clear which. His report card is deep in the red.

A father and mother ask the school what it can do about their son’s phone addiction. His hand and his phone seem fused together. Whenever they try to set limits, he has a tantrum. They have stopped trying, because otherwise “things get less pleasant at home”.

This piece grew out of our own observations in education and out of the many conversations we have had with committed teachers, school leaders and parents. What surprised us in the process is how internationally recognizable many of these situations turn out to be. Across different educational contexts, countries and school cultures, strikingly similar patterns kept recurring. That makes it unlikely we are dealing with a collection of isolated incidents or local peculiarities.

The same questions kept coming back. Why does setting limits seem to have become so difficult for more and more parents? Where does the rising absenteeism come from? Have students become more vulnerable? Why do schools increasingly feel the need to accommodate parents’ wishes, even when those wishes have no educational value? How is it that teachers so often find themselves standing alone when they hold students to account for their effort, behavior or responsibility?

How did we get here, we wondered. It seemed worth investigating that question. What large, overarching changes have taken place in our thinking about children, parenting, education, well-being and authority? And how do those changes interlock, so that parents, schools and students end up in a dynamic that no one consciously designed, but in which almost everyone, acting on their beliefs about their own role, helps to keep it in place?

The common thread appears to be a shift in how we view discomfort and difficulty in children's lives. Although almost every philosophical and pedagogical tradition regards these experiences as an essential ingredient for a child's healthy development and growth, discomfort and difficulty have become something to be prevented, softened or outsourced, both in parenting and in education. And that is, to put it mildly, problematic.

Learning, growing and becoming an adult call not only for safety, recognition and support. They also call for resistance, limits and effort, and for the experience that you can endure and overcome difficult things. Children obviously need good care. But it is highly questionable whether our current conception of care adequately prepares them for the inevitable difficulties that will come their way.

This reflection is ultimately about how parents, students and schools can create a culture that leaves room for discomfort, so that children grow into resilient adults in an environment marked by a healthy dynamic between school and parents, one that supports them in getting through difficulties rather than avoiding them.

Part 1: How did we get here?

To understand the current dynamic between parents, schools and students, we first look back. The situation we find ourselves in now is the result of a long cultural development.

Four paradigm shifts

The situation in which schools, parents and children now find themselves is the result of a long cultural development and several paradigm shifts. The end of the eighteenth century marked the moment when Western thinking about the child began to shift. Much has changed since then. We discuss four important shifts.

- The **romantic image of the child** as an innocent being who must be protected from the harshness of the adult world.
- The **therapeutic turn**, in which discomfort is ever more quickly read as a potential psychological risk.
- **Individualism** and **consumer culture**, which increasingly lead education to be approached as a service that must align with the preferences, needs and experience of the individual child.
- **The erosion of institutional trust**, which makes the professional judgment of school and teacher less self-evidently accepted and ever more often subject of negotiation.

Romanticism and the invention of Youthland

Western thinking about childhood changed profoundly from the Enlightenment onward, and above all during Romanticism. In *Grootbrengen door kleinhouden* (Raising children by keeping them small, 1975), the education historian Lea Dasberg sharply described how this shift permanently changed the way we think about children and parenting. Before these developments, childhood was not seen as a protected, separate world. Children took part in adult life from an early age: working, helping run the household and caring for family members. It was often a hard and sometimes merciless existence, no cause for nostalgia.

The Romantics, Rousseau in particular, introduced a new idea: the child as a being of natural innocence who must be protected from the corrupting influence of the adult world. Childhood became a separate sphere, a domain to be preserved for as long as possible. A happy, carefree youth was no longer merely desirable but a moral duty. It was thought that this would later make children into happier and more balanced adults. Dasberg called this world **Youthland** (*Jeugdland*): a protected enclave, shielded from the demands, tensions and responsibilities of adult existence.

This gave rise to a paradox. How was Youthland supposed to prepare children for adult life while at the same time structurally protecting them from everything that belongs to adulthood? How do you learn to carry responsibility, to deal with frustration and to persevere through difficulty when you are kept small intellectually, emotionally and socially by being shielded?

The risk is that children grow older without truly becoming adults. They remain stuck in Youthland, insufficiently practiced in carrying responsibility, in enduring resistance, and in grasping that the world does not exist to guarantee their happiness.

The therapeutic turn

Romanticism saw the adult world as corrupting; twentieth-century psychology saw development as vulnerable to all kinds of harm. Different threats, the same conclusion: the child must be protected.

The rise of psychology in the 1980s and 1990s strongly influenced parenting culture in Western societies and among educated people worldwide. Attachment theory, trauma-sensitive thinking and the emphasis on emotional attunement have changed what it means to be a good parent. Children are approached with greater attunement, taken more seriously emotionally, and seen more as individuals with an inner life that matters. These are without doubt important gains.

That same development, however, brought a powerful side effect: the fear of inflicting psychological harm and thereby failing as a parent. Healthy discomfort and the difficulties of a growing child's life become potential traumas, and temporary developmental challenges become a problem. Seen in this light, not removing these difficulties comes to look like a sign that the relationship might be damaged, or that you are falling short as a parent. And in a culture that, on top of this, increasingly reads discomfort as a possible psychological risk, setting limits takes on an emotional charge that earlier generations would scarcely recognize.

Individualism and consumerism

Individualism and consumerism have brought about two related shifts: from a focus on the collective to a focus on the individual, and from the school as an institution of social cohesion to the school as a service provider.

Individualism places the unique individual at the center, with their own needs, preferences and identity, and makes that the measure of what is good and just. Consumer culture adds a further logic: relationships between people and institutions come to resemble those between provider and customer, with choice, entitlement and satisfaction as key terms. Together they change the way we view education and the child's place within it.

This begins from a valuable premise: children deserve education that has an eye for who they are, for their particular strengths and difficulties. This healthy individualism turns sour, however, when attention to the child shifts into adaptation to the child. The expectation of an individualized, low-stress education that continually manages to motivate intrinsically then lies in wait. From this the child learns that its needs are the measure of things and that discomfort is something the environment must take away. A harmful lesson, because learning and living together demand the opposite.

When individualism goes too far, the relationship between parent and school changes as well. What began as legitimate attention to the individual shifts into consumerism: the school becomes a provider that must meet the specific expectations of every family, and education is judged by the logic of the market, responsive, flexible and tailored to the wishes of the individual consumer. The shared purpose for which the school exists thereby drops out of view.

The erosion of trust in institutions

When the individual is the highest measure, the idea of a commonly held good loses its self-evidence.

The authority of, and trust in, institutions is determined by the extent to which they are seen as carriers of a shared ethos, a common set of norms, values and meaning. When that ethos is no longer collectively carried, or when trust declines in the institutions meant to uphold it, their choices and their very right to exist must be defended again and again. This declining trust is not limited to schools; it also affects medicine, government, the media and all sorts of other forms of expertise. The causes are too vast for this reflection, but they do mean that the authority of professionals has become continually open to dispute.

A school or teacher is no longer self-evidently a professional whose judgment carries authority, but one voice among many, and sometimes less credible than a podcast or the opinion of a neighbor. In the United States, public trust in teachers fell between 2019 and 2021 from 63%, already worryingly low, to 57%. Almost half of voters said their trust in the public school system had declined since the pandemic (Hunt Institute, 2022; Merod, 2021). Outside the United States too, trust is under pressure: in OECD countries, satisfaction with the education system fell on average from 63% to 60% between 2021 and 2023, with notable declines in Korea, Norway and Finland, among others (OECD, 2024). A comparable development is visible in Australia: the share of Australians with high trust in schools fell from 73.6% in 2019 to 58.9% in 2025 (Biddle, 2026).

The implication of these figures is that roughly one in three families has little trust in teachers or in the school system. That is quite something. When relationships are no longer governed by shared norms and values, they take on a transactional character. The school is no longer a community institution to which families entrust an important part of their child's formation, but a provider that must constantly justify its decisions, accommodate individual wishes and actively manage parental expectations. The parties then no longer act out of connection or a shared goal, but out of uncertainty and self-interest. Comfort and results become the guiding concerns.

The question is no longer: "How do we together contribute to this child's growing up?" but: "Is my child getting what it is entitled to?" That shift changes the tone, the expectations and the distribution of responsibility.

How the shifts reinforce one another

The four shifts named above, namely Youthland (the romantic image of the child), the therapeutic turn, individualism and consumerism, and the erosion of institutional authority, reinforce one another.

- Romanticism lays the foundation with its emphasis on the experience of the individual child as the benchmark for what is good.
- The therapeutic turn elevates that experience into something that must be protected from discomfort and difficulty.
- Individualism builds logically on this and places the unique individual and its needs at the center of moral and pedagogical considerations. Consumerism, in turn, cleverly capitalizes on this by equating happiness and well-being with what can be offered to the individual.
- The hollowing out of institutional trust reinforces individualism still further. When institutions lose their perceived value, individuals come to feel increasingly left to fend for themselves, which strengthens "self-interest first" behavior.

No single shift causes the problem; it is their combined logic, which keeps itself in place. That logic becomes visible in how parents respond to tension, how schools make policy, how support structures function and how students learn to view their own discomfort.

Part 2: What do we see now?

Together, the four shifts named above produce recognizable patterns in the thinking, feeling and acting of students, parents and education.

Accommodation

When children are seen as vulnerable and discomfort as a risk, a pattern arises that clinical psychology calls *accommodation*: adapting the environment in order to prevent or remove a child's discomfort, tension or frustration. Think of keeping a child home before a test because of stress, fatigue or reluctance to go to school. Or giving in to avoid intense emotions. Or routinely

taking difficulties out of a child's hands that the child could actually solve on its own. Parents do this not out of indifference but out of care; in that moment, protecting feels like the right response.

When a child experiences tension, the parent's primal nervous system kicks in. The threat must be neutralized. Indispensable in the face of real danger, this becomes dysfunctional in the ordinary difficulties of growing up. Tension before a test, frustration when something does not work, aversion to things you do not feel like doing, these are not threats to be switched off. They are the very conditions under which resilience, self-confidence and competence arise.

Once set in motion, accommodation is hard to reverse. Research on accommodating parents shows how quickly they adjust their behavior or family routines to reduce their child's tension, and how difficult it is to scale those adjustments back when a child responds with sadness, anger or resistance (Lebowitz et al., 2014). What began as a one-off gesture, keeping a child home once, giving in once, gradually becomes the norm the child comes to count on, and the cost of restoring the limits rises by the day.

The clinical literature on anxiety in children is strikingly clear: accommodation does not reduce anxiety but deepens it. A systematic review of 38 studies found consistent links between overprotective parenting and elevated levels of anxiety and depression in children (Vigdal & Brøndbo, 2022). It implicitly confirms the message that the difficulty really is dangerous and beyond the child's capacity to cope with (Lebowitz, 2019; Craske et al., 2014).

Boris's parents do not create a resilient child by letting him game all night. They create a child who has learned that no one guards the limits, and who is therefore less able to guard them himself. Fiona has not yet been allowed to experience how resilient she actually is, because she lacks the confirmation that she can withstand difficulties and that her parents believe she is capable of it.

Diagnoses as part of accommodation

Accommodation does not play out only in the private sphere; it also takes institutional forms. One important expression of this is the growing role of diagnoses.

Fortunately, many children who used to be overlooked now receive the support they need. At the same time, the sharp rise in diagnoses such as autism, dyslexia and ADHD raises questions. A systematic review of 334 studies concluded that ADHD is regularly overdiagnosed in children with milder symptoms (Kazda et al., 2021). More than half of physicians suspect that autism diagnoses are insufficiently substantiated in more than 10% of cases (Davidovitch et al., 2021). And the boundary between dyslexia and broader reading difficulties seems to have grown more diffuse, partly because diagnostic criteria have been broadened and schools increasingly tie institutional support to a diagnosis. That last point touches on accommodation: a diagnosis offers recognition and access to help, but in doing so it also functions as a formal route to adapting the environment to the child.

A diagnosis also performs important emotional work for families. The uncertainty about whether a child's difficulties are developmental, related to upbringing, or simply part of growing up and learning to deal with resistance, is replaced by a medical explanation. The school takes on obligations; the parent becomes an advocate. Behavior that was previously seen as something a

child must learn to take responsibility for is more easily interpreted as a symptom of an underlying disorder. Both child and parents are thereby partly relieved of wrestling with the ordinary challenges and forms of resistance that are part of development and of life.

Education as a product

Alongside diagnoses, accommodation also takes shape in how education itself is approached: no longer as a force that builds society, but as a product to be delivered.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, children became not only recipients of products but also consumers with preferences, desires and purchasing power. Through this slow shift, parenthood quietly took on a new meaning: good care became ever more closely tied to providing, offering, enabling and keeping children satisfied. The sociologist Allison Pugh showed how buying things for children has become an important way in which parents express love and connection, but also a way of regulating their own uncertainty about being good parents (Pugh, 2009).

That logic has migrated into education. If the child is a consumer, the parent becomes an advocate or purchaser, and the school a provider that must justify its product. Disappointing grades are blamed on a faulty delivery (“that teacher just doesn’t know how to make it interesting”, and, in the case of private schools, “is this what I paid for?!”); a teacher who challenges students becomes a service provider who is insufficiently customer-focused (“school should be fun too”, “let kids be kids”); a test that provokes tension becomes something that must be adjusted (““can't they take it in chunks?”, “they're already stressed enough as it is.”). In the process, the collective, formative character of education drops out of sight.

When schools take over this logic, it directly touches one of the most robust findings in education research: students rise to the expectations teachers have of them, or else fall short of them (Hattie, 2009; Rubie-Davies, 2014). Holding high expectations also requires a school culture that supports doing so. In a culture that places comfort above productive challenge, it becomes harder for teachers to hold on to high expectations, even when they know this is precisely what students need. What begins as protection of the individual child thus collectively undermines the very conditions under which children can grow.

What the figures show

The consequences of this dynamic are not visible only in anecdotes. International figures show a consistent picture.

The increase in mental health problems among children and young people is visible internationally. The OECD (Europe, North and Central America) reports a deterioration in young people’s mental resilience. In nine of eleven countries, mental health declined between 2012 and 2022 by an average of 3% to 16% per year (OECD, 2026). In Europe, according to the WHO, one in seven children and adolescents lives with a mental health condition, with prevalence having risen by about a third over fifteen years (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2025). Outside Europe, Australian figures, among others, point in the same direction (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In the United States too, this development was already visible before COVID:

between 2016 and 2019, the number of children with an anxiety diagnosis rose by 27%, while the number of depression diagnoses rose by 24% (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022).

Chronic school absenteeism among US students rose from 15% to 26% between 2019 and 2023 (Kearney & Childs, 2024). Over the same period, persistent absence in England doubled (Finning et al., 2024). In Japan, long-term school absence reached a record high in 2023, with 346,482 students absent for 30 days or more (Nippon.com, 2024). Australia is likewise experiencing a broad attendance crisis: in 2024 only 59.8% of students in years 1 to 10 attended school on at least 90% of school days (ACARA, 2025). For Northern Europe it is difficult to make firm statements, because school attendance is recorded in different ways (Sandhaug et al., 2022).

Part 3: What is an alternative?

If the current logic has problematic consequences, the question of how things could be done differently presses itself upon us. In this final part we sketch a different framework and what it asks of parents, schools, teachers and school leaders.

Education as a civilizing project

The developments we are seeing raise the question of what we are raising and educating children for. If the answer is to optimize the individual experience, then the expectations and consequences we now see are logical. No serious pedagogical tradition, however, looks at upbringing and education in that way. Education is seen as a civilizing project: the way in which a society not only passes on knowledge (and wisdom) but also forms character, builds capacity and teaches people to orient themselves toward something greater than themselves.

Contemporary research on the purpose of education likewise confirms that flourishing cannot be understood in purely individual terms. It necessarily includes social, moral and self-transcending dimensions, among them the development of habits, values and the capacity to contribute to something that reaches beyond personal comfort (Kristjánsson, 2020; Curren et al., 2024). Happiness and self-confidence, paradoxically, arise precisely not from a constant focus on one's own happiness. They grow rather as a by-product of engagement with something outside oneself: taking on difficult things, carrying responsibility, trying to get better at something and experiencing that your effort matters.

A different image of the child

Pedagogy, philosophy and almost every religious tradition view the child differently from the logic of the market and the excesses of individualism. In those traditions a child is not first and foremost a bearer of preferences to be served, but a human being in the making, someone who is not yet who he or she could become, and who is for that very reason entrusted to adults. What the child wants at any given moment does not, in this view, coincide with what it needs; and what it needs, it cannot yet fully oversee for itself. That is why raising children is not a matter of supply and demand but of responsibility: the adult stands surety for the direction in which the child develops, even when that direction runs counter to the child's immediate preferences.

From this view, parental authority is not a constraint on the child but precisely a condition for development. The school is not a service provider but a social institution with a purpose that reaches beyond individual preferences. And discomfort that arises from effort and challenge is not a problem to be solved but a necessary condition for growth. Difficulty is not the enemy of development but its very engine (Kristjánsson, 2020; Damon, 2008).

For parenting this means that the question “what does my child need?” must not narrow into “what makes things easier for my child right now?”. For education it means guarding against tailored support losing its pedagogical limits, so that it is no longer a matter of fitting support that points toward growth, but of adapting the environment to the child’s immediate experience.

Warmth and clear limits

What research consistently shows is the importance of a combination of warmth and firmness. This expresses itself in high expectations combined with genuine engagement, in challenge within a relationship of trust, and in adults who set clear limits while at the same time conveying that the child is equal to that challenge (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Research on anxiety and resilience reaches the same conclusion. People do not learn that something is safe because the tension is taken away, but because they take on a difficult situation, experience that they can cope with it, and on that basis revise their estimate of the threat. This mechanism, known as inhibitory learning, forms the basis of confidence and resilience (Bandura, 1997; Craske et al., 2014; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021).

In practice this means that discomfort, in a safe setting, is part of learning: the tension of not being able to do something yet, the frustration of practicing, the resistance involved in persevering, the confrontation with a standard set higher than what you already master. No problem. You are doing well.

What this asks of adults

The practical implications for all parties involved seem self-evident.

Parents must set healthy limits. Not because rules matter more than relationships, but because holding a limit, warmly and without apology, is one of the most powerful ways an adult can let a child experience: I believe you can handle this.

For the same reasons, schools must take care to keep holding high expectations and to create a culture in which teachers are supported in doing so rather than undermined.

The relationship between parents and school will have to be grounded in genuine partnership: a shared civilizing project in which parenting and education are jointly aimed at the child’s growing up, instead of a negotiation between provider and consumer over maximum comfort.

This will not change by simply calling on parents to try harder or by handing schools new policy frameworks. It changes only when people in and around education are willing to state clearly what both research and pedagogical wisdom show again and again: protecting children from difficulty is not care. At best it rests on misconceptions, and at worst it is a lack of courage.

Fiona goes back to school and takes her test. Boris goes to bed on time, his console out of reach. Jim's father looks at his son's red report card and sees, above all, a boy who needs to study harder. Ibrahim just stays behind. For a while, things are less pleasant at home, because the parents have made the right choice: to protect their son from his addiction by holding the line.

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