## Are Online Communities Making Our Kids Less Happy?

Ten years ago, the idea of "student counseling" was barely a whisper in the hallways of New Taipei City schools. I was a young professional, venturing into those spaces, eager to connect with children, teachers, and parents, searching for ways to help them navigate the complexities of school life. My work in those early years spanned nearly fifty to sixty elementary and junior high schools, each a microcosm of the challenges and triumphs of childhood. I transitioned from a solo practitioner to a guidance teacher supervisor for the Education Bureau, a role that allowed me to deepen my understanding of the work and share my experiences through a collaborative approach. During this time, we witnessed the landmark passage of the "Student Guidance Act," the first counseling-specific law in the country, a testament to the growing recognition of the vital role guidance plays in education. This journey, filled with vulnerability, connection, and the pursuit of meaningful change, has been an honor to witness and participate in.

回首頭幾年校園的輔導工作，我還記得早期由導師們轉介來輔導處的孩子，多半是注意力不足、過動、衝動、嗆老師、對立行為、情緒暴衝跑出教室等外顯問題，這些也是大家一眼就能在教室中看出來的明顯行為。

My work has evolved over the years, moving from the familiar spaces of schools to the heart of the mental health clinic I co-founded. And in recent years, the faces of the children referred to our care have changed. While we once saw a predominance of overt behavioral challenges—withdrawal, social anxiety, self-harm, internet addiction, school refusal, and learning difficulties—the struggles I witness now are of a different, more nuanced kind.

The shifting landscape of children’s challenges over the past decade has captivated my attention. It’s compelled me to dig deeper, to understand the “why” behind these changes. As I’ve walked alongside the Milu Valley team—witnessed their dedication to these young souls—and learned from their insights, a picture has begun to emerge. It’s not just about individual children; it’s about the collective experience of a generation.

## The Rising Tide of Teen Angst: A Global Phenomenon

The research is clear: our kids are hurting. A recent study in \*Parenting\* magazine, surveying 10,000 children and adolescents, painted a stark picture of emotional distress. It's not just a hunch or a whisper—the numbers are undeniable. The Ministry of Education reported that in 2019, “emotional distress” topped the list of reasons junior high and elementary students sought help from guidance counselors. In high school, it came in second, only behind career counseling. The J.C. Foundation’s 2018 survey revealed that a staggering one in seven high school students exhibited depressive symptoms. And a chilling statistic from the Ministry of Health and Welfare's 2014 survey revealed that approximately 20% of junior high and high school students had seriously considered suicide. These findings are a wake-up call. We can’t ignore the emotional vulnerability of our children—they are struggling, and they need our support.

The survey revealed a heartbreaking truth: among elementary and middle school students who navigate the online world, the largest group are those who struggle with feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, and a reluctance to step outside their comfort zones. This vulnerability, this fear of not being enough, is magnified for nearly half of these children by the worry that their parents' love is conditional. And when it comes to navigating the complex landscape of relationships, nearly half of these children are deeply affected by what others think, especially negative judgments. This concern about fitting in, about being accepted, is particularly pronounced among girls.

There’s a growing conversation around the world about the struggles adolescents are facing with mental health. Formal professional organizations have been sounding the alarm, and the data is stark. In 2019, the \*Journal of Abnormal Psychology\*—a leading voice in the field—published a study showing a staggering 50% increase in mental health issues among adolescents between 2009 and 2017. The researchers pointed to electronic communication and digital media as potential culprits. And in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the \*Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report\*, a decade-long analysis of adolescent behavior. The report confirmed the disturbing trend: mental health issues among teens have been on the rise for a long time. We’re talking about a whole generation wrestling with this, and it's time to get real about what's happening.

These experiences, coupled with countless observations my team and I have made in our counseling sessions over the last few years, have left me with a subtle but profound sense of dissonance about this generation of kids.

This could be a generation raised in the safest period in human history, yet they carry a deep, unsettling insecurity within their souls.