## Are Our Children Losing Their Way in the Digital Wilderness?

A decade ago, the nascent notion of "student counselling" was barely a flicker on the horizon. I was then a young professional, invited by schools across New Taipei City to walk their halls, to speak with children, teachers, and parents, seeking to guide those young minds in their journey of adaptation. Over the years, my work has extended to encompass nearly fifty to sixty elementary and secondary schools in the city. My path has led from the solitary practice of a psychologist within the school walls to the role of a guidance teacher supervisor for the Department of Education. There, I continue to refine and exchange knowledge within the collaborative context of our counselling work. During this time, I have also witnessed the landmark passage and implementation of Taiwan’s first counselling-specific legislation, the “Student Counselling Act.” This legislation provides a much-needed legal bedrock for the essential work of school counselling.

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 professional journey has taken me from the familiar halls of schools to the intimate space of the mental health clinic I co-founded with colleagues. In recent years, as we've navigated the emotional landscapes of our young clients, a profound shift has become evident. The outward, often disruptive behaviours that once defined their struggles have yielded to a more insidious, internalized distress. Social withdrawal, the gnawing anxieties of social interaction, self-inflicted harm, the seductive grip of the digital world, the refusal to engage with the structured world of school—these are the silent cries for help that now echo through our clinic's hallways. The children of today are wrestling with a different kind of pain, a pain that speaks to the complexities of the modern world, a pain that demands our deepest understanding and our most compassionate response.

The shifting tides of childhood distress over the past decade have stirred a deep curiosity within me, urging a deeper reflection on the roots of these troubling trends. As I've journeyed alongside the Milu Valley team, serving an ever-growing number of children and gleaning a richer understanding of their struggles, along with the insightful observations and discussions with our dedicated team of psychologists, I've gradually come to discern the outlines and hallmarks of an entire generation grappling with these profound challenges.

## The Silent Crisis: A Generational Wound in Our Collective Psyche

The weight of our children's emotional burdens grows heavier with each passing generation. A recent survey by \*Parenting Magazine\*, titled "2021 Ten Thousand Person Survey on the Psychological Security of Children and Youth," paints a stark picture. In 2019, the Ministry of Education reported that "emotional distress" topped the list of reasons junior high and elementary students sought help from counselling centres. The same year, it ranked second among high schoolers, trailing only career guidance. Further evidence of this trend emerged in a 2018 survey conducted by the J.C. Foundation, revealing that one in seven high school students exhibits symptoms of depression. Even more alarmingly, a 2014 Ministry of Health and Welfare study indicated that approximately 20% of junior high and senior high school students have seriously considered suicide. These statistics, while sobering, are merely the tip of the iceberg, reflecting a profound and pervasive crisis in the emotional well-being of our youth. We are witnessing a generation grappling with anxieties and uncertainties that were unimaginable to their predecessors. This generation, shaped by the complexities of our modern world, faces a unique and challenging landscape of emotional distress.

The survey painted a sobering picture: among elementary and middle school children who regularly navigate the digital landscape, a disproportionate number wrestled with feelings of inadequacy, a fear of failure, and a hesitancy to embrace the unknown. This generation, wired into the constant connectivity of the internet, seemed particularly susceptible to these anxieties. Close to half of these children also harbored anxieties about their parents' love being contingent upon their performance, a subtle yet pervasive pressure that could weigh heavily on young minds. In the realm of interpersonal relationships and mental well-being, the survey revealed a significant percentage – close to half – expressing deep concern about the opinions of others, particularly negative feedback. This trend, however, was not gender-neutral. Girls, more so than boys, demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to social judgment, a finding that underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by children in the digital age.

The escalating tide of mental health challenges among young people, a global phenomenon, has not escaped the attention of researchers in North America. In the United States, the \*Journal of Abnormal Psychology\* (2019) reported a staggering 50% increase in mental health illnesses among adolescents between 2009 and 2017, a period that coincided with a dramatic rise in digital media consumption. This stark trend, observed by professional organizations, suggests a possible link between the relentless connectivity of the digital world and the escalating fragility of the adolescent psyche. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in its 2021 \*Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report\*, echoed this alarming trend, documenting a decade-long escalation in mental health concerns among young people, further reinforcing the urgent need to understand the profound impact of modern life on the developing mind.

These phenomena, coupled with my team's and my own extensive observations in counselling over recent years, have left me with a subtle yet profound sense of dissonance when contemplating this generation of children.

This could be a generation that, despite having grown up in the safest period in human history, feels the most profound lack of security.