## Are Our Kids Less Happy Thanks to Online Social Media?

A mere decade back, "student counseling" was still a fledgling notion, a sapling barely pushing through the earth. As a professional, I was summoned by sundry schools in New Taipei City, invited to step onto their hallowed grounds and mingle with their students, teachers, and parents. The aim? To find a path for these young souls to navigate their environment, to make sense of their world. Over the past ten years, my services have extended to nearly fifty or sixty elementary and middle schools within the city limits. From my initial foray as an independent psychologist, shuttling between various schools, to my present role as a guidance teacher supervisor for the Department of Education, our team has consistently refined and shared our counseling techniques. This collective effort, this ongoing dialogue, has been instrumental in shaping our approach. During this period, we also bore witness to the passage and implementation of the "Student Counseling Act," a landmark piece of legislation, the first of its kind in the country, passed by the Legislative Yuan. This act, this formal legal framework, has laid a solid foundation for school counseling, providing a clear roadmap for our endeavors.

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 practice, once confined to the ivory towers of academia, has now found its home in the mental health clinic I co-founded with my partners. Over the years, through the clinic’s counseling services, I’ve witnessed a disturbing trend: a surge in the number of children referred for treatment. The issues they grapple with have shifted dramatically from the outward, behavioral problems of yore. Now, we see an alarming increase in interpersonal withdrawal, crippling social anxiety, self-harm, a near-epidemic of internet addiction, school refusal, and a growing number struggling with learning difficulties. These are a far cry from the primary issues children faced in the past.

The shifting landscape of childhood woes over the past decade has stirred my curiosity, urging me to plumb the depths of their root causes. Working with the Milu Valley team—a haven of psychological therapy—for an extended period, serving a swelling tide of children and gaining an intimate understanding, while weaving together the internal whispers and observations of the team's psychologists, I have come to discern the contours and characteristics of an entire generation hidden within these phenomena.

## Gloom and Doom: Teen Angst on the Rise Worldwide

A growing body of research, like a slow, inexorable tide, washes over us with a stark and chilling truth: today's children are drowning in a sea of emotional distress. The Ministry of Education's own statistics, in their cold, stark clarity, tell a grim tale. In 2019, "emotional distress" reigned supreme as the top reason junior high and elementary school students sought solace in the hushed confines of counseling offices. At the high school level, it came in a close second, eclipsed only by the ever-present anxieties of career choices. The J.C. Foundation, in their 2018 survey, painted a picture of stark despair: one in seven high school students, their young lives weighed down by the suffocating grip of depression. And the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in their 2014 survey, revealed the chilling reality that a full 20% of junior and senior high school students had contemplated, seriously, the ultimate escape—suicide. These grim statistics, culled from a special article in \*Parenting Today\* titled "2021 Survey on Children and Adolescent Psychological Security Among 10,000 People," serve as a stark reminder of the pervasiveness of emotional distress among our children and adolescents today. It is a truth we cannot ignore.

The survey revealed a sobering truth: among elementary and middle schoolers who regularly surf the internet, a disconcerting percentage harbors feelings of inferiority, dreads failure, and shies away from the unfamiliar. This cohort, the most plugged-in, also experiences the highest levels of anxiety about their parents’ love being conditional—a staggering near 50% worrying about their worthiness. In matters of the heart and mind, nearly half of these children, particularly girls, are acutely sensitive to the opinions of others, especially negative judgments, revealing a profound insecurity about their place in the social order.

Formal research conducted by professional institutions abroad has also revealed a growing tide of mental health issues and challenges among adolescents in recent years. In 2019, a study published in the \*Journal of Abnormal Psychology\*, a leading American academic journal, found a roughly 50% increase in the prevalence of mental health–related disorders among adolescents between 2009 and 2017. The study concluded that electronic communication and digital media may play a significant role in this trend. As if by design, in 2021, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released its \*Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report\*, which examined behavioral data from adolescents over the past decade. The report found an increase in mental health issues among adolescents across the past ten years.

My own observations, coupled with those of my team, gleaned from years of counseling this generation, have stirred in me a peculiar, almost paradoxical sense about these youngsters.

This generation, cradled in the safest haven history has ever known, feels insecure.