## Preface: Are Our Children Less Happy in the Age of Online Communities?

A decade ago, the notion of “student counseling” was still a fledgling concept, barely hatched. As a professional, I was called upon by numerous schools in New Taipei City to venture onto their campuses and engage with children, teachers, and parents, seeking ways for the young to navigate their surroundings. Over the ensuing years, my services have extended to nearly fifty or sixty elementary and secondary schools throughout the city. From my independent practice as a psychologist within various schools to my current role as a counseling teacher supervisor at the Education Bureau, I have continued to refine and refine our counseling work through collaboration. I have also witnessed the historic passage of the “Student Counseling Act,” the nation’s inaugural counseling law, through the Legislative Yuan, thereby establishing a firm legal framework for school counseling.

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 focus has gradually shifted away from the school setting to the mental health clinic I co-founded. In recent years, our clinic has seen a dramatic increase in referrals for children. These children present with problems that differ significantly from the behavioral issues we once observed: social withdrawal, crippling anxiety, self-harm, internet addiction, school refusal, and academic decline. This shift represents a profound change in the landscape of childhood struggles.

The shifting contours of children's troubles over the past decade have held me captive, piquing my curiosity about the hidden forces at play. As my tenure with the Milu Valley team (the psychological therapy center) has deepened, and my work with its children multiplied, I’ve absorbed the internal murmurings and astute observations of its psychologists. This immersion has, like a slow unfolding, revealed the distinct features and outlines of an entire generation, its struggles etched upon the faces of these children.

## The Unraveling of Youth: A Global Mental Health Crisis

The latest research, culled from a wealth of studies, paints a disturbing picture of the emotional landscape facing today’s youth. A 2019 report from the Ministry of Education, for instance, revealed that “emotional distress” topped the list of concerns prompting junior and elementary school students to seek help from guidance counselors. High school students, according to the same report, placed “emotional distress” as the second most prevalent concern, trailing only career counseling. A 2018 survey by the J. Walter Thompson Foundation further underscored this trend, indicating that a staggering one in seven high schoolers harbor depressive emotions. A 2014 survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare presented even more alarming findings, revealing that a significant 20% of middle and high school students have contemplated suicide. These statistics, gleaned from the article “2021 Children and Adolescents’ Psychological Security Survey of 10,000 People” in \*Parents & Children\*, offer a stark reminder of the pervasive nature of emotional distress among today’s children and adolescents.

The survey revealed a disconcerting trend: among children navigating the middle grades, those who regularly traversed the digital landscape exhibited a heightened sense of inadequacy. A staggering fifty percent of these young souls harbored the gnawing worry that parental affection was contingent upon their achievements. The digital age, it seemed, had fostered a pervasive sense of self-doubt. In the delicate realm of interpersonal relationships, nearly half of these children confessed to an acute sensitivity to the judgments of others, particularly negative ones. This anxiety was even more pronounced among the girls, who seemed to bear the weight of societal expectations with a particularly heavy heart.

Formal investigations by professional institutions abroad confirm a disquieting trend: adolescents are struggling with a mounting crisis of mental health. In 2019, the prestigious \*Journal of Abnormal Psychology\* in the United States published a study revealing a staggering 50% increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents between 2009 and 2017. The study’s authors concluded that electronic communication and digital media may be significantly contributing to this alarming surge. Adding to the growing body of evidence, in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the \*Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report,\* a comprehensive analysis of behavioral data from adolescents over the past decade. The survey echoed the findings of the \*Journal of Abnormal Psychology,\* confirming that mental health issues among adolescents have demonstrably worsened during this period.

These events, coupled with my own extensive observations in the counseling sessions I've conducted over the past several years, have left me with a subtle, yet undeniable, sense of paradox regarding this generation of children.

This could be a generation, born into the safest period in history, yet haunted by a profound sense of insecurity.