Kate Julian makes several observations about the increasing anxiety in children.

1 I am the mother of two children, 6 and 10. I used to think our country was raising resilient children, but given the apparent direction of our country and our world, I have not been feeling optimistic about the conditions for future sanity — theirs, mine or anyone else's. Anxiety is, in 2020, ubiquitous, inescapable, an ambient condition. It is the topic of pop music (Ariana Grande's *Breathin'*), the country's best-selling graphic novel (Raina Telgemeier's *Guts*), and a whole cohort's sense of humour (Generation Z's seemingly bottomless appetite for anxiety memes). Anxiety is on the rise in all age groups, such that even toddlers are not immune.

2 There is a problem with much of the anxiety about children's anxiety. However, anxiety itself is not something to be warded off. It is a universal and necessary response to stress and uncertainty. It is uncomfortable but as with most discomfort, we can learn to tolerate it. Yet far too often, we insulate our children from distress and discomfort entirely. And children who do not learn to cope with distress face a rough path to adulthood, experiencing difficulty with the hurdles and humiliations of life in a deeply competitive culture, one with a narrowing definition of success and a rising cost of living.

3 Most critiques of this century's child-rearing practices have treated parents as rational actors, however extreme some of our actions might be. If we hover over our children, we are said to do so in reaction to the surrounding conditions — media coverage of kidnappings, for example, or plummeting college admission rates. In other words, modern parents, or at least the upper-middle-class ones who populate most articles about parenting trends, are widely perceived not as flailing but as the opposite: too hyper and too vigilant. And yet, despite more than a decade's evidence that helicopter parenting is counterproductive, kids today are perhaps more overprotected, more leery of adulthood, more in need of therapy. Moreover, when school and family systems both have a baseline level of stress — when adults are always on high alert, kids do not get a chance to rebound, and so they resist taking on the sorts of natural and healthy risks that will help them grow. And there you have it, a generation of anxious kids, looking fearfully at the world around them, growing up to become anxious adults. Children do not need perfect parents, but they do benefit greatly from parents who can serve as a non-anxious presence.

4 Recognising the relationship between parental and child anxiety suggests an important means of prevention and intervention: because anxiety is only partially genetic, a change in parenting style may well help spare a child's mental health. If the instinct to protect a child leads many of us into the trap of overparenting, I have come to believe that time pressure keeps us there. And for mothers, especially, time pressure can be compounded by guilt. When there is all the guilt that, as a working parent, I missed X, Y, Z, it is a lot harder to follow through with an unpleasant behavioural intervention. And if you have only an hour with your child at night, you would like it to be a pleasant one. Therapists who treat anxiety like to talk about how short-term pain leads to long-term gain — how enduring discomfort now can make you more resilient later. In recent decades, however, the opposite principle has guided many American parents and not only when it comes to the parenting of anxious children; on everything from toilet training to eating and sleeping habits, many of our parenting strategies trade short-term gain (a few minutes saved here, a conflict averted there) for long-term pain.

5 That we would cut corners in this way is maybe inevitable in a country that lacks adequate parental leave or quality, affordable child care; one in which school and employment schedules are misaligned and in which our work culture expects employees to always be on. Add to the mix a permissive streak in American child-rearing, one that has simultaneously indulged children and encouraged their independence, and you have an extremely labour-intensive recipe for parental misery. Parents are actually doing more for their kids and many kids are doing less for themselves.

6 For one hint of just how much parenting style may influence a child's anxiety level, consider the diverging paths of boys and girls. There is no greater risk factor for anxiety disorders than being born female. Research shows that women are twice as likely as men to develop one, and women's illnesses generally last longer, have more severe symptoms, and are more disabling. Weirdly enough, females start off the less anxious sex; male newborns are the fussy, irritable ones. To my mind, the most convincing theory as to why women end up more fearful and inhibited than men is that when we were kids, adults responded disparately to our fears. When girls are anxious, adults are more likely to be protective and allow them to avoid scary situations. Boys are told to 'suck it up'.

7 Maybe the way to think about recent parenting is this: All kids today are being overprotected the way only girls used to be. Except the changes in childhood are far broader than that. There have been steep declines in the percentage of children who walk or bicycle to school, have summer jobs, or do household chores regularly. The problem with these declines is not that the activities in question are inherently virtuous, but that they provide children with two very important things, the first of which is an experience in tolerating discomfort. I was struck by how many clinicians talked about the importance of learning to endure emotional upset as well as physical distress and even pain. This message was so consistent, in fact, that some of the therapists started to sound like members of a cult with a sadistic bent.

8 Doing chores and getting oneself where one needs to go also provide another, more obvious benefit: a sense of personal competence. Obviously many do just fine in life without ever having a summer job or walking themselves to school. But not experiencing such activities, combined with the recent changes in child-rearing and technology, will create a particularly toxic combination: teenagers with a deficit of life skills and a lack of practice in weathering the frustrations to which that deficit may lead, while having the means to retreat and distract themselves from those frustrations.

9 The need for a distraction partially explains why over the past five years, the age at which most kids get a smartphone has continued to tick downward. For kids of all ages, screens are cheap and reliable babysitters. Another reason is that some parents surrender to demands for technology because they cannot tolerate either their own kids' anger or peer pressure from other kids' parents. Finally, having difficulty limiting their own device use, which weakens their feeling of authority on the matter, many parents have resigned themselves to their children's unfettered device use.

10 There is also a widespread hesitancy to talk about depressing concepts with kids. Despite being more educated, parents are still ignoring the benefits of graduated exposure to things that frighten their children. Sometimes it is the avoidance that makes it harder for kids who are anxious. In fact, protecting children requires creating honest, even brutal depictions of a no-doubt-about-it disaster, because talking about things that scare all of us makes them gradually less scary, and each time we talk about sadness, it diminishes a little. However, it sometimes seems like the more overwhelming the world gets, the more adults try to 'protect' children.

11 If we want to prepare our kids for difficult times, we should let them fail at things now and allow them to encounter obstacles and to talk candidly about worrisome topics. To be very clear, this is not a cure-all for mental illness. What we need to recognise, though, is that our current approach to childhood does not reduce basic human vulnerabilities. It exacerbates them. Good parenting can help make a difference. Start now before it gets too late.

Adapted from 'What happened to American childhood?'; The Atlantic; May 2020.