

Generation snowflake is not failing us: we're failing them

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New figures reveal an alarming rise in self-harm among the young. It's little wonder in a highly pressured world that places such value on competition



'There is plenty going on in the world to traumatise a sensitive child.' Photograph: Alamy

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A healthy society, surely, is one that helps its children feel safe and secure. If this were a banal proposition, it wouldn't even have to be stated. Yet there are plenty of people who would contend that it's not up to society to make kids feel safe. That, they will announce with tremendous self-satisfaction, is the job of their parents. It's as if they don't even know that humans are social animals, and that it is the ability of humans to think and act from social motivations that fostered civilisation.

For these folks, any sign that children are struggling in Britain today is sneeringly dismissed as more evidence of generation snowflake's feeble lack of resilience. This aggressive, sloganeering refusal to engage with the feelings of vulnerability of others, but instead to mock and belittle them? That in itself is a statement of intent. It is an assertion that helping young people to feel safe and secure is not in the least their business. On the contrary.

Research by the NSPCC, gathered through freedom of information requests, warns that serious cases of self-harm among young people have jumped by 14% in the last three years, with 19,000 children and young people treated in hospital in England and Wales in the last 12 months. People self-harm when they crave the primitive distraction of physical pain from the insistent complexity of emotional distress. The respite is brief and dangerous. Often, it piles shame and guilt on to a chaotic heap of negative emotions that has already proved overwhelming: snowflakes dissolving in their own sticky blood.

The fact that these children choose to harm themselves rather than others is a sign that they feel plenty of shame about their fears already, for which they blame themselves. Often, children report that they couldn't talk to their parents because their parents were too busy. What they tend actually to mean is that they're worried and upset because they know their parents are worried and upset, and they don't want to add to the burden.

But if it's the job of parents not to be worried and upset, so that they can help their children, then you have to ask why it's such a great idea to consider human competition rather than human collaboration as the magic fountain from which all good things gush. It's always too simplistic to theorise about how a vast range of individual and particular crises are all down to one thing. Yet the list of the usual suspects that's aired when mass psychological struggle hits the headlines does include a lot of stuff that has competitive elements.

There's the pressure to look attractive, the pressure to succeed at school, the pressure to be popular, the pressure to get a job, to get a home. If I were growing up now, I'd be terrified. I was pretty terrified in the 1970s, when I'd no idea how much more demanding and complex life was going to get. Are children wrong to feel these pressures? Can any parent honestly tell them that none of it matters and that life has a way of turning out OK?

Yet all this is just a backdrop to the existential struggles of life. Children still have to deal with private catastrophe - bereavement or abuse, illness or trauma - as well as global horror: the horrific evidence of human aggression and the suffering it causes, there on your phone all day, every day. All this, alongside the sheer effort of becoming yourself in an era that idolises individualism.

Left and right, politically, they both do this. The left champions identity, the right champions robust economic self-sufficiency. Do we give children time to find out who they are, among the blanket demands that they should Be Themselves? We don't give them time and we certainly don't give them much in the way of psychological tools or support. After all, therapy costs money in this economically competitive world.

We need to feel part of something bigger than ourselves, and sometimes I think Brexit is best understood as an expression of that yearning. Young people, on the whole, felt like part

of Europe because they'd grown up with it. Maybe older people just felt like their own place in the world had become so much harder to locate in their hearts once they weren't simply British. And how people viewed Europe in their daily lives also raised the spectre of competition; people coming here looking for work, and helpless employers, themselves governed by competition, quite unable to do anything other than pay the lowest wages possible.

I'm not saying that vulnerable young people self-harm because hashtag Brexit. That would be too simple. But I am saying that it may reflect the fact that there is too much competition in the world and not enough caring support. Competition can be a great driver of achievement, but so can collaboration. The corrosive thing about competition is that it fosters fear of failure, which has to be countered. Balance is everything, and that's what we don't have. People are afraid and ashamed of their fear; so it festers, and explodes in anger and resentment. It's fertile ground for demagogues who offer glib, bogus answers and, boy, do they plough it.

You can choose to see "generation snowflake" as a bunch of wimps, or you can observe that there is plenty going on in the world to traumatise a sensitive child - or adult. Then you can think a bit about how traumatised people make bad decisions, and conclude that the aggression, the fear, the shame, the self-harm - it has to stop. The very essence of what it is to be human - to be able to look after one another and help one another find solutions to our problems - is what is at stake, and children feel it.

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