

# Those who want to spare children from everything are not doing them any favour

by Allan Guggenbühl\*



Allan Guggenbühl.  
(Picture allan  
guggenbuehl.com)

Many parents put their children at the centre of their lives and make no demands of them. But growing up also involves frustration, challenges – and learning to overcome them.

“Sleeping in on Monday morning is a human right!” the teenager declares defiantly. He is outraged that his teacher expects him to be at

work at seven o’clock after the weekend. On Monday morning, he needs to recover from the weekend! Getting up early is impossible!

Growing up is a long, complicated, and challenging process. Most children spend their early years in a protected environment. In small families, they are the centre of their parents’ attention. Parents organise their free time and everyday life around their offspring. Vacations are geared toward the children, and their social contacts are observed. The well-being of their children and the avoidance of frustration are important concerns for parents. Later, at school, teachers try to respond to children’s problems and treat them with empathy. Ultimate demands and demonstrative distancing are considered problematic – the aim is to listen and find a consensus. When problems arise, the causes are investigated and, if necessary, additional help is provided. Parents and schools strive to give children a happy childhood and to support them adequately.

## Professionalised leisure time

But children have not always been the focus of the adult world; the significance of childhood and parental strategies have changed in recent decades. Fifty or a hundred years ago, very few



Children and young people often demand more of themselves than their parents expect. (Picture keystone)

children had their own bedroom. They slept in the same room or even in the same bed as their siblings, and at the dinner table they had to deal with an impossible sister or a rude brother.

Today, many children grow up with few or no siblings and even have their own bathroom. When they want to play, they are not banished to the basement; instead, they can naturally use the living room. Children no longer spend their free time on the street, in the woods, or in backyards; it has been professionalised. Painting classes, playgroups, swimming lessons, ballet, resilience courses, or pirate adventures are on the agenda. Adults are present and can intervene in disputes. If the way to school is too long, the authorities are called in, and if children are punished in class, their parents contact the school management (in the past, there was an additional punishment at home). Protecting children and responding to their wishes are priorities today.

We all want our children to have a happy, relaxed childhood. Knowing the consequences of bad childhood experiences, we pay a lot of attention to the development of children and young people and want the next generation to grow up with little frustration and annoyance. The more prosperous a society is and the fewer children there are, the greater their emotional significance and the greater the concern for them. The central importance of children has an impact on their behaviour.

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### **There is no right to well-being**

"My friends were mean to me! They excluded me from playing elastic", a girl complains to her mother. This leads to a conversation with the teacher and ultimately a group discussion in class. The accused girls promise not to be mean anymore and to include their schoolmate. The fact that this girl was excluded because of her unwillingness to cooperate and her snappy behaviour is no issue. The parents and the teacher do not want the girl to become frustrated and possibly traumatised.

The problem with a child- and youth-centred approach is that it suggests to children that they have a right to be accepted as they are and that frustrations are not their fault. They are told that they have a right to well-being and to have their wishes fulfilled. This pushes an important aspect of growing up into the background: overcoming one's own frustrations, the necessity of making one's own efforts, and putting one's own experiences of pain into perspective.

Life is not an arena for self-realisation, but rather a series of arduous experiences. Failures, cruelty, injustices, and social rejection are just as much a part of growing up as developing one's own interests, friendships, and pleasant experiences. However, it is important to note that not every person and not every institution welcomes you with open arms. Many are not impressed by you, find you lacking in skills or intelligence, or even perceive you as a disruptive factor. You don't just make friends; you also encounter enemies. Life is exhausting.

Developing a thick skin, perseverance, and the ability to put your own desires and feelings aside in certain situations is therefore part of the process of growing up. Every now and then, you must swallow your anger, ignore your own sensitivities, endure injustices, and keep your cool. Growing up is hard because you no longer have your mother's watchful eye and your father's interventions. You are on your own, and those around you often don't think you're as great as your parents did or perhaps a therapist suggested. The path to adulthood is rocky and paved with failures and traumatic experiences. You must learn to cope and set aside your own feelings.

The problem, however, is that education avoids the topics of toughening up and enduring frustration; understandably, it prefers to focus on positive goals. The promotion of talents and

interests is at the forefront. Harmony, self-realisation, and, of course, the prevention of frustration is on the agenda. As a father or mother, you want your child to have a happy childhood.

The result, however, is a generation that is unable to cope well with failure and hurt feelings and therefore perceives unpleasant demands for adaptation as impertinence. They expect their environment to adapt to them and are outraged when their own wishes and sensitivities are ignored. However, as we all know, the path to adulthood is not a bed of roses, but is also associated with experiencing one's own inadequacies, failures, and injustices. The world does not wait for you, and for many concerns, those around you have no understanding.

You cannot turn back the wheel of time. No one wants a loveless or harsh upbringing, as was common in British boarding schools. Education and school should be humane. However, prosperity and child-centeredness have meant that the harshness of life is no longer experienced in gangs of children, where pecking orders prevail, and in families where material survival is the main focus or where one must assert oneself against several siblings. Parents talk to their children and negotiate when something does not meet their wishes, seeking mutually acceptable solutions. These are all important advances that we do not want to give up. The danger, however, is that confronting the harshness of life is being suspended. Young people reach adulthood with an attitude that leaves no room for self-discipline and toughness towards themselves.

### **Overcoming oneself**

"Yes, we have a barn where we can stay if it rains!" the 13-year-old scout leader assures the mother of a boy in his group on the phone. They have planned a weekend camp in the Zurich Oberland in a forest. Only the scout leaders have cell phones. I am impressed by this scout leader's organisational skills and ask him how he found the barn. "Barn? I didn't organise anything", he replies. "But it reassures the mother when I say so".

In fact, a thunderstorm came up over the weekend, and the group had to take shelter under tarpaulins in the forest. The scouts returned home completely soaked. To the astonishment of their parents, however, the weekend was a complete success for the scouts. The eight- to

ten-year-old boys returned home proudly. There was no sign of whining.

Perhaps it is not up to parents and schools to wean children off whining, but rather they learn it among themselves, independently or in groups. When children are among themselves, immersed in a topic or devoted to a sport, they also learn to demand something of themselves and not to react oversensitively. You can't afford to be too whiny around your peers, and a common goal spurs you on to overcome your

own limitations. The scout group got soaked and half frozen. But afterwards, the boys were proud of their experience. They felt they had achieved something and later bragged about their weekend. Their confidence in their ability to cope with difficult situations was strengthened.

Source: <https://schweizermonat.ch/wer-kinder-von-allem-verschonen-will-tut-ihnen-keinen-gefallen/>,  
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