

Children need secure attachments

More and more young people are being hospitalised for mental disorders. However, they often do not suffer from depression, but from an impoverishment of relationships

by Dr Liselotte Staub PHD*, Switzerland



Liselotte Staub.
(Picture ma)

18-year-old Sabine lives with her mother and has started an apprenticeship as a commercial trainee during the coronavirus crisis. Now she sits opposite her family doctor and asks for a sick note. She can no longer sleep and is therefore constantly tired. She often cries, can't concentrate at work and is no

longer happy about anything. She is at the end of her tether and often thinks it would be better if she were no longer alive. The family doctor writes Sabine off sick and refers her to psychotherapy with a suspected case of depression.

Sabine explains to the therapist that starting her apprenticeship working from home was very difficult for her. She had never really settled into her apprenticeship. The long working days affected her, which is why she often had headaches and her mother had to pick her up from work. If the boss criticised her, she would cry and could no longer concentrate. Her colleagues at work talked about her behind her back and increasingly bullied her. She could no longer go back there and therefore decided, in consultation with her mother, to quit her apprenticeship.

Since this decision, she feels super fit and happy again. Sleeping in is good for her. During the day, she meets colleagues who are in a similar situation. She has also already found a new job, albeit still unpaid. As an assistant promoter, she organises parties, is responsible for booking DJs and connects with followers via *Instagram* and *Snapchat*. She does this work exclusively on-

line, which irritates her mum a little. But ultimately, the most important thing for mum is that she is happy again.

Escaping into hedonism

While the therapist is unable to see the sustainability of Sabine's new occupation, the case reveals a familiar pattern that is reflected in the statistics: In Switzerland, more young people are dropping out of apprenticeships than ever before, namely one in five trainees, which corresponds to a rate of 22.4 per cent. Most dropouts are in the hairdressing and beauty care sectors, and the fewest in forestry.

Our society is confronted with a growing group of young people who are clearly no longer able to cope with the demands of life. They are living in a parallel world, lacking resources and life skills. They lack stamina and resilience. They are characterised by a low tolerance of frustration and simultaneously high and unrealistic expectations. In a situation of hopelessness, a hedonistic lifestyle is the only point of orientation. What appears to be depression suddenly evaporates when these young people withdraw into their sandpit world and are not disturbed. Sabine's answer to the therapist's question about what would have to happen for her to feel as bad as she did a fortnight ago is symptomatic of this: "If I'm prevented from doing what's good for me."

Last year, Switzerland recorded an unprecedented 26 per cent increase in hospitalisations for mental disorders among young women aged between 10 and 24. In practice, however, young people like Sabine do not suffer from depression, but from a chronic, generalised adjustment disorder. This disorder is neither recognised in the diagnostic manuals nor is a corresponding treatment approach established. In an eclectic approach, the psychotherapists act as surrogate parents. Based on a trusting relationship, a form of re-education in the sense of a confrontation with reality is possible in the best case. For genuinely adolescent-typical problems, such as gender identity disorders or problems with phys-

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ical appearance, endocrinology and plastic surgery have replaced psychotherapy.

We are confronted with the atrophy of an entire generation. There may be various influences behind this. However, the general impoverishment of relationships can be identified as a possible main cause.

Parents want to be loved

The final maturation of the brain and the surge of sex hormones demand a great deal of adaptation from adolescents. For this reason alone, adolescence is a crisis-ridden phase. Heredity and individual metabolic processes can partly explain why there are children who develop well despite adverse circumstances and overcome the difficulties of adolescence without any problems. It is well established that personality traits such as intelligence and temperament are about 50 per cent genetically determined and can therefore only be changed to a limited extent. On the other hand, psychological factors, which are formed in an environmental and especially in an educational context, are important in the formation of the other foundations for a sustainable and resilient mindset.

These young people rarely come from an environment characterised by poverty or abuse, on the contrary. The parents love their children, want the best for them and are afraid of doing anything wrong or contradicting them. The children are constantly entertained to nip any boredom in the bud. At the same time, the parents are preoccupied with themselves, be it with the realisation of their professional goals or self-realisation in other areas. The constant entertainment and the often delegated care of the children at an early age, which is not only at the expense of the development of attachment and relationships, but also at the expense of parenting: in the limited time with the children, parents who are tired from their busy lives are unable to set boundaries and resolve the associated conflicts. They just want to have an enjoyable time together.

The destruction of this paradise-like state becomes a trauma for the children when the parents separate and lose sight of their children's developmental needs in the ongoing conflict with the other parent or in the consolidation of their new partnership. In 2022, around 13,000 children in Switzerland experienced the separation of their parents. In addition to coping with the usual developmental tasks, these children and adolescents feel compelled to divide



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(Picture KEYSTONE/Gaetan Bally)

themselves as fairly as possible between their parents, endure conflicts of loyalty and adapt to the changed living conditions.

In the extreme case of parentification, needy parents see their children as friends and companions who fulfil the function of filling their own emptiness or alleviating their own loneliness. These parents want to be loved by their children. They can't stand it when children are angry with them, which is unavoidable when it comes to setting boundaries and demanding certain behaviours. While the children of these parents are hardly ever confronted with rules and boundaries, they are "bled dry" in the constant overload of emotional role reversal and do not develop a sense of age-appropriate task mastery and self-efficacy.

The demand that, in the interests of equal opportunities, schools should make up for what parents fail to do at home is wishful thinking: the current school model does not envisage that knowledge is mainly imparted by the teachers themselves and that these teachers are available to the children as a model for relationships, an attachment figure or even identification figure. Teachers become "coaches for learning" who help pupils to find answers online, even though the children do not yet have any questions due to a lack of prior knowledge. Outsourcing thinking and knowledge to a tablet or smartphone has been proven to hinder learning and the development of self-efficacy because the brain does not have to do any memorisation work. Children are left to their own devices in workshops or weekly lesson plans and in online knowledge acquisition and drop out due to excessive demands and a lack of guidance. Meanwhile, teachers, who have been demoted to supervisors, must occupy themselves with recording school activities and

procedures and justifying their actions to the outside world as a form of self-protection.

Lack of empathy

When asked about her strengths, Sabine says: "I'm a good listener and an important source of support for my colleagues when they have problems." The fact is that this subjective feeling of social competence often does not correspond to reality. Young people only sympathise with their fellow sufferers but have little empathy for those who think differently and sometimes impress with their astonishing resilience when they are dragged out of their feel-good bubble of the online sandpit.

While young people realise they are overwhelming their parents with their age-typical crises, they seek compensatory support and guidance from their peers, with social media becoming increasingly important. But on *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *TikTok* and the like, the supposed friends turn out to be merciless slave drivers: the competitive pressure or pressure to stand out becomes a question of to be or not to be. Brain research impressively demonstrates that not only does the use of social networks increase blood pressure, but the feeling of unhappiness in young people correlates highly significantly with screen activity and the development of empathy falls by the wayside.

Corona measures as a fire accelerant

Finally, the westernised culture of feasibility and the lack of anchoring in a belief system contribute to the excessive demands. In the narcissistic overestimation and self-dramatisation, the question of where from, where to and why is obsolete. Therefore, no supportive hypotheses are generated. There is no doubt that in previous generations there were children who did not feel held or loved by their parents. But in contrast to today, these children grew up believing that people were subordinate to a higher power and that this power could be called upon in an emergency and have a comforting effect.

Today, children are taught that man alone has control over happiness and misfortune and that anything is possible if you only want it. According to this view, the inability to do something belongs to the realm of psychopathology. Accordingly, young people do not admit that they are incapable of something: They don't want to conform, they don't want to make an effort, or they don't want to endure criticism.

The coronavirus measures have accelerated this unfavourable development: Young people have been harshly and mercilessly thwarted in the fulfilment of their developmental tasks – including real-life confrontation and comparison with peers and detachment from the parental home. The resources to cope with this situation were not (yet) developed. To compensate for this, the isolated young people centred around themselves and fled even more into the online world. Due to a lack of synchronisation with reality, worries and fears grew into insurmountable obstacles with lasting consequences: eating disorders, body image disorders, exhaustion, and chronic generalised adjustment disorders.

Attachments create resilience

An insecure attachment can often be diagnosed in these young people, which is partly responsible for their lack of resilience. In the first two years of life, the child forms an emotional bond to an available, reliable, and familiar caregiver before being able to attach to one or two other attachment figures. If the caregiver does not provide the necessary sensitivity in the real interaction with the child or if children who are not yet two years old are placed in a crèche-like group setting with changing carers for more than ten hours a week, not only is the development of attachment impaired, but these children are also exposed to greater stress. Due to the toxic influence of the measurably higher stress hormone levels on the still young brain, these children become more vulnerable when it comes to dealing with challenges or stress.

Resilience research has amply demonstrated that it is secure attachments to attachment figures that make children strong and equip them for the crisis-ridden adolescence. The securely attached individual is resilient and receptive to sustainable relationships – the only indestructible force in a world full of danger and injustice. However, these reliable findings are at odds with the socio-political ideas regarding the working life of new parents. It would be desirable if we, as a species of "social mammals", would once again orientate ourselves more towards the findings of basic scientific research instead of cultivating ideologies that better serve political interests in the short term.

Source: *Schweizer Monat*, <https://schweizermonat.ch/focus/psychische-gesundheit>, issue 1111 – November 2023
(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")