

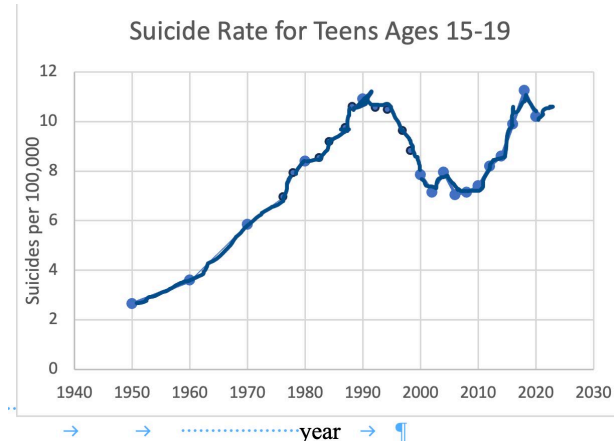
We Are Depriving Kids of the Freedoms They Need for Healthy Development

How policy changes can ameliorate the youth mental health crisis.—Peter Gray, Boston College

A. Roles of Play and Other Independent Activities in Children’s Mental Health

1. What is play? Why “Independent” activity?
2. Role of these in kids’ immediate happiness.
3. Long-term effects of these on mental health.
How they build courage, resilience, social skills, internal locus of control.

B. US Teen Suicide Rates Over Decades



Note that other indices show the same trends.

C. Societal Changes, 1950-1990, that Reduced Kids’ Freedom

(Huge decline in kids’ outdoor freedom.)

1. Public & private spaces became less child friendly.
2. Neighborhoods became less cohesive.
3. “Stranger danger” fears increased. Role of media in promoting these fears.
4. Child protective services started going overboard in charges of “neglect.”
5. The weight of schooling increased.
6. New parenting norms required constant supervision of kids.

D. Why Did Kids’ Mental Health Improve Somewhat, 1990-2010?

1. With computers and the Internet, kids found new ways to play, connect, and manifest competence.
2. Research showing the many benefits of computer games.

E. Why Did Kids’ Mental Health Decline Sharply from 2010-2019?

1. Research evidence does not support the smartphone/social media theory of this.
2. Multiple lines of evidence support the theory that Common Core altered schooling in ways that dramatically increased anxiety and depression among school-aged children. Evidence includes: Surveys among teens of sources of stress; timing of mental health breakdowns with the school calendar; and highest rates of breakdowns in “high-achievement schools.”

F. Recommended Policy Changes

1. City and town renewal projects with kids in mind.
2. Adventure playgrounds in every neighborhood, with non-intervening playworker for safety.
3. Repeal of Common Core and renewal of fun in school.
4. Change in state child protection procedures to respect parents’ decisions about what is safe or not for their kids. Adopt the Let Grow “reasonable independence law.”

Some References

- Book** Peter Gray. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life.* Basic Books.
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- Gray, P. (2024). The origin and harm of federal education mandates. Substack: *Play Makes Us Human letter #50*. – Also see letter #51.
- Also see relevant academic articles at petergray.org. and substack letters at petergray.substack.com