



Equipping children with coping skills for the years ahead

By Michael Hawton, Child Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

The issue of how to develop emotional hardiness in children has become an area of much interest in recent times. Added to this, none of us wants to be seen to be just standing by or letting our child go through emotional pain unnecessarily. It's quite natural for a caring parent to want to step in to release the distress that accompanies any child's feelings of being treated unfairly. But, this compulsion to act, doesn't mean that we *should* always step in.

In their new book on how parents have become overprotective, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt and Lockianoff (2018) say that the strengthening of children's mental well-being may have something to do with how we facilitate a child's experiences for 'life's' problem-solving episodes, including how *they* can be coached to engage with these problems, independently.

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Some long-term studies have been reflecting downturns in children's capacity to manage problems, independently. Compared to the 1960s, the levels in our ability to resolve issues for ourselves, called our internal 'locus of control' has been steadily decreasing. A strong *internal* locus of control correlates with a belief we can control our own destiny. Without a healthy sense of internal locus of control, children can feel powerless and overwhelmed. According to Stixrud and Johnson, the recent increases in childhood anxiety are a symptom of this phenomenon. They note that there has been an 80 percent rise in young people with an external locus of control (the belief that destiny is determined by external factors).

Are parents afraid of being judged and therefore falling into 'appearances parenting'?

Here's what I think. I have been observing parents for over 35 years and what I have noticed is an increase in parents feeling judged by other parents and an increase in what I term 'appearances parenting', which is a term I use to describe parents doing things for appearances sake. In this model of parenting, a parent can feel derelict or judged by others if we don't act. In my opinion, this model of parenting has become quite fashionable in Australia – parents doing things for appearances sake – such as not correcting their child in public because they want to appear cool (everything in our house is wonderful all the time) or because they want to appear responsive to their child's needs (such as when a parent caves-in to a child's whingeing, after the child behaves embarrassingly in the chocolate aisle).

So, what I have seen increasingly is parents wanting to do something for appearances-sake. That perception of wanting to appear to be doing something (and our vulnerability to the judgement of others) if we don't stand-up against an apparent injustice, can be compelling.

But doing something (or anything) may not be the best course of action to take for your child. Sometimes, by focusing on how we might act as their guide to help them resolve an issue *for themselves*, might be the best course of action to take. Routinely giving your child a 'get-out-of-jail-card' and protecting them from all this distress is not being helpful. It's a sub-optimal solution that can backfire when they do eventually have to face adversity. That said, there is much parents can do to resolve problems that arise from time to time, without prematurely stepping in.

In the next few articles in this series, we'll be looking at just that matter; we'll explore how you can help your child be more self-driven in the face of adversity.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>