

Setting the Bar: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Era of Distraction, Dependency, and Entitlement

Description

Today, I'll feature an excerpt from [Setting the Bar](#)—a recently published book from educator and high school Strength and Conditioning Coordinator Shane Trotter. After over a decade in education, Trotter is convinced that the dominant youth development culture is setting our children up for failure. As he explains:

Criticizing the newest generation is a tradition as old as time. But there is truly something worrisome about the trends we are seeing in today's kids. You've likely had this intuition yourself as you side-eye that family across the restaurant-kids and parents alike hunched over their individual devices. Or maybe you've bemoaned the decline of childhood hallmarks like pick-up games and biking across town-replaced by the allure of infinite entertainment and the growing expectation that parents manage every aspect of their kids' lives. Or perhaps you're a high-school teacher who has watched firsthand as students grow less comfortable socializing, less energized, less responsible, and less capable of setting out into the world, much less thriving in it.

It sounds progressive to dismiss these concerns, equating them with the typical brand of *back in my day* rhetoric. But that forgoes the opportunity for course correction at a time when it is most critical. Kids these days, like the societies they grow up in, are increasingly unhealthy, depressed, anxious, and plagued by a sense of meaninglessness. They are protected, entertained, and celebrated, but starved of something much more essential to their fulfillment.

With his diverse perspective as a decade-long educator, a respected voice in fitness coaching, and a writer featured everywhere from *Quillette* to *Spartan*, Shane Trotter synthesizes the most timeless wisdom and the most timely research to craft a unique vision of how we can adapt to create a generation that has the tools to thrive in an era marked by unprecedented change.

This is an Excerpt From [Setting the Bar: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Era of Distraction, Dependency, and Entitlement](#) by Shane Trotter

“No man was ever wise by chance.”—Seneca

At just after 11 p.m. on Saturday, June 15th, 2013, Ethan Couch jumped behind the wheel of his father's red Ford F-350. His own Harley Davidson package F-150 was in the shop. With seven friends aboard, two who sat exposed in the truck bed, the sixteen-year-old sped down a rural two-lane road at over 70 miles-per-hour.

Further down Bursen Retta Road, Breanna Mitchell's Mercury Mountaineer sat stalled on the shoulder. Mitchell, a 24-year-old chef at a private club, had been working late and was on her way home when her tire blew and she swerved into a mailbox. The homeowners, Hollie and Eric Boyles, came out to help along with their 21-year-old daughter, Shelby. A fourth helper, Brian Jennings was driving home from his son's graduation party when he noticed Mitchell's car and stopped to

assist. Eric Boyles grabbed the mailbox and took it to his garage, which is where he was when he heard what sounded like an explosion.

Couch had been showing off by driving on the wrong side of the road. He overcorrected while transitioning back to his lane, slamming his F-350 into Mitchell's SUV. Gas, burning rubber, torn metal and human bodies littered the road. One Tarrant County Sheriff's deputy recollected the scene looking "more like a plane crash than a car wreck." Mitchell, Jennings, and Boyles' wife and daughter were dead before emergency personnel arrived. All seven of Couch's passengers survived, but Sergio Molina, one of those in the truck bed, was paralyzed and now communicates by blinking.

The investigation revealed that Couch had stolen two cases of beer from a local Wal-Mart about an hour before. His blood-alcohol level was 0.24% (three times the legal limit) and he tested positive for both Valium and marijuana. Couch pled guilty to four counts of intoxication manslaughter and two counts of intoxication assault, but his defense team wasn't lying down. In a move that earned animosity from every corner of the globe, Couch's lawyers claimed that he couldn't be held responsible for his behavior because he'd never been held responsible. His parents had fought all of his battles and used their considerable wealth to buffer out any blemishes he acquired along the way.

When Ethan drove himself to school at age 13, the school's founder, LeVonna Anderson went to discuss her concerns with his father, Fred Couch. Fred threatened to buy the school and, soon after, unenrolled Ethan. At 15, the police found Ethan parked at the Dollar General with a Miller Lite, a bottle of Grey Goose, and a naked 14-year-old girl. When the officer asked Ethan what he was doing, he responded, "What's it look like I'm doing?" Despite breaking at least six laws, his parents helped finagle the charges down to a minor-in-possession and minor-in-consumption.

As the psychologist who treated Ethan's family after the accident, Dr. Dick Miller remarked, rather than the golden rule, Ethan was taught: "We have the gold. We make the rules." Ethan's lawyers claimed he was a victim of his upbringing. How could Ethan know there were limits when he'd never been given any? Dr. Miller even came up with a name for Ethan's condition: "affluenza."

A media hailstorm ensued. Ethan Couch became the poster child for all that was wrong with the American justice system. A separate set of rules for the wealthy. A get out of jail free card for the privileged. Here was a spoiled young man who'd been running wild without any concept of a line. His utter disregard for the law and human decency wrought destruction in countless lives. Now the court was being asked to continue the trend. They were being asked to reduce his consequences because he had been so sheltered from consequences that he couldn't have known any better. And they did. Ethan Couch was sentenced to ten years of probation and sent to a beautiful California rehab facility where his parents flew first class to visit him each week.

If you are human, this verdict disgusts you. Your heart aches for the victims and your blood boils when you think about the Couches and their ridiculous legal defense. Yet, the thing is, we all know that, despite its gimmicky name, affluenza is a real phenomenon. Spoiled kids with no limits tend to become entitled narcissists. Parents who fight all their children's battles and remove consequences tend to create dependent, immature young adults who have no sense of reality. In this sense, you don't have to be rich to fall victim to "affluenza." You just have to be coddled.

This is the problem with our modern youth development paradigm. It promotes treating every child like they are the center of the universe, somehow deserving of our constant adulation and certainly needing us to solve every problem for them. The new norm is to over-provide, overprotect, and to always find the excuse for a child's behavior. Everyone is responsible, except for the youth.

If he were raised in a different setting, Ethan Couch might have been a great kid. If he was fortunate enough to receive boundaries and consequences he might have grown into a hardworking, productive member of society. Ethan's environment contributed to his behavior just as any drug-dealer or thief's environment promotes theirs. Like you, I empathize more with an impoverished thief, yet both simply manifest the way their environment interacts with their biochemistry. When it comes to behavior, nature and nurture are the only two factors at play, and as we can't very well influence nature, our focus should be on nurture. Ethan Couch was nurtured to be an incredible asshole.

Still, this doesn't excuse his behavior. In fact, the best thing we could have done for Ethan Couch is to hold him fully accountable. Maturation is fundamental to happiness and the most essential lessons often have to be learned the hard way.

Our goal must be to pull behavior up to influence the majority towards living better. This is why we have to set standards and focus on behavior regardless of a person's circumstances. In fact, this is the greatest form of respect: to treat each person as if they are capable of taking responsibility for themselves. When the boundary of ultimate responsibility is blurred, dysfunction follows. It is important to understand people's backgrounds, meet them where they are, and support them. Yet, prior circumstances can't be a justification to cut someone off from consequences.

We don't examine Ethan Couch's background to excuse his behavior. Rather, it is a useful archetype for helping us recognize the five ingredients of our dysfunctional youth development paradigm.

These are:

- 1. Low Expectations:** Treating youth as perpetual children rather than adults-in-training. As such they are always innocent and never responsible.
- 2. Blunted Feedback:** Under the guise of kindness, we remove honesty and accountability that would prompt appropriate adaptations.
- 3. Victimization:** We program youth to interpret every adversity as the consequence of their own unique deficit, thus, justifying their demand that others solve problems for them. They learn to see others as responsible for each problem, rather than themselves.
- 4. Deferred Responsibility:** Having determined external circumstances are responsible for their challenges, youth learn to expect other people, institutions, and technologies to solve their problems and they quit when circumstances present even a modest challenge.
- 5. Empty Values:** Youth are fed a materialist culture that prioritizes possessions, pleasure, and outcomes over deeper human needs. Within this cultural value system, giving kids what they want is always seen as the greatest good (unless that conflicts with a parent's protective instincts).

We aren't Tonya and Fred Couch, but modern norms are closer to them than we'd like to think. And these ingredients of dysfunction are not reserved for rich exceptions like Ethan Couch. In fact, wealthy parents can be some of the best at identifying and avoiding these pitfalls. In our affluent modern societies, the ingredients of dysfunction are part of the mainstream culture perpetuated through our media influencers, television shows, and institutions. They have infected our schools where even the least privileged youths fall victim to them.

Bulldozer Parenting

“My dear child, I do not worry about the bleakness of life. I worry about the bleakness of having no challenges in life.”—Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Letter to my Unborn Daughter*

I recently sat down with a high school principal. It was April, near the end of a school year and I could tell she was tired. As our conversation went on, she told me about three separate incidents that she was currently addressing. All three featured a kid caught under the influence of drugs or in possession of drugs. In each instance, the student confessed. One, she explained, brazenly detailed how he had illegally obtained Adderall, crushed it up, and mixed it with cough medicine and a Monster energy drink. Despite these student's confessions, all three punishments were being appealed by their parents.

More than any educator I've ever met, this principal connects with students, loves them, and sees the best in them. She did not threaten the students and wear them down with coercive interrogation tactics. The students freely admitted their offenses after being caught. Yet, in all three scenarios, the parents felt entitled to demand more of this principal's time and energy, pulling her away from the other 2,400 students and 150 teachers, and even calling her character into question in order to prevent their kid from facing consequences.

Working in high schools over the past decade, I've experienced hundreds of anecdotes like this. It has become common for parents to spend their days tracking their child's every move. They monitor their high schooler's grades online, tell them when to study, when to make up a test, when to go in for extra help, or even when to sign up for the SAT. In their eyes, they have to, or Junior just won't do it. Once, after I explained to a mother why I'd prefer that her sixteen-year-old son email me to ask for an extension rather than her, I got the response: *“I'm just glad he cared enough to ask me.”*

With this ever-present safety net, it is no wonder high school students are more dependent than ever. They expect their parents to wake them up, manage their schedules, prepare every meal, buy them everything they want, and solve every problem. When a 17-year-old isn't getting as much playing time as he wants on the varsity team, more often than not, Daddy and Mommy set up a meeting with the coach. If a teacher catches a student cheating, she can expect parents to point the finger at other students, to normalize academic dishonesty, and to demand that she makes a new test so their baby can try again. Likewise, an inordinate number of parents hold teachers responsible when their kids don't get a certain grade. When a student scores poorly on tests and doesn't turn in half their work, parents often set out to change the teacher's behavior, rather than their child's.

But the problem isn't any one parent's demand to bump up a grade, excuse cheating, give more playing time, or award varsity status. The problem isn't any one email that starts out with, *“I'm not one of those crazy parents, but...”* Crazy has always been here. The bigger issue is the frequency of this madness and the way schools have cowered down to these demands.

Before continuing to critique modern education, as I will throughout this book, I need to acknowledge that it houses some of our most selfless, caring, and supportive citizens. I know teachers who spend hundreds of dollars decorating classrooms and creating projects for their students. They give up their lunch each day to offer math tutorials and bend over backwards to try to make a difference despite all obstacles. Furthermore, there are countless examples of amazing school programs doing amazing work for their communities. Nothing I say is meant to diminish or disregard that sterling work.

However, the exceptional minority is too often characterized as the majority in response to anyone who would question the quality of our schools. These outliers have been made the poster child of education, meant to preclude any dialogue about what is going wrong. But amazing teachers would be much more effective in a better system. One great teacher is just a drop in the ocean—meaningful, perhaps life-changing in individual cases, and yet, not enough. Their impact can’t compare to the broader educational culture, which is, most often, the product of our flawed youth development paradigm, rather than a defense against it. In a time marked by outrage and immediate gratification, education has failed to draw the line and define a better vision.

The result is a system driven to create the illusion of education without all the inconvenience of learning. Everyone scrambles to guarantee outcomes with little concern for the skills that made those outcomes desirable in the first place. And the kids suffer for it.

Endnotes:

1. Ethan, Fred, and Tonya Couch

Mooney, Michael J. “The Worst Parents Ever.” *D Magazine*, May 2015.

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[Setting the Bar](#) is available now in hardcover, paperback, ebook, and audible formats.

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