Course Corrections: Two Narratives for Generation Z

From Generation Z Unfiltered

Tim Elmore
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TIM ELMORE

One of the saddest war stories you'll ever hear is a story of “friendly fire.”

I will never forget hearing about Black Hawk Down in April 1994. It was a shootdown incident in which two U.S. Air Force F-15Cs shot down two U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters over northern Iraq, killing twenty-six military and civilian personnel. They were over the Iraqi “no-fly” zones, but both were from our U.S. military. Since the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) system failed, our Air Force shooters could not tell they were firing on their own guys. It was a tragic and unnecessary loss of human life, coming from allies, not enemies.

The term “friendly fire” was officially adopted in World War I when we realized a significant percentage of our losses was due to our own military forces. Friendly fire is often a byproduct of the “fog of war”—the confusion inherent in the heat of battle. This “fog of war” happens both because the stakes are high and the emotions are high in the midst of battle. We mistake who the enemy is; we feel before we think; and we know how important what we’re doing is to so many.

The same is true for leading our young today.

Most of the adults I meet who work with students are well-intentioned people. They are teachers, parents, leaders, and coaches who’ve committed their time to investing in the emerging generation. Sadly, too often, we are guilty of emotional “friendly fire.” Because we know the stakes are high and our emotions run high, we fire at our young unintentionally. We may aim poorly; we may get caught in the “fog” of all we’re doing; or we may mistake them for the enemy. However it happens, ultimately, we’re the ones who are actually doing most of the damage to them. Let me explain.

WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY—AND HE IS US

Over the last decade, I have spoken to over five hundred thousand educators, parents, coaches, and employers. I began to see a pattern regarding their attitudes toward young people. The two emotions they expressed consistently to me were:

1. Frustration with their kids.
2. Fear for their kids.

The frustration is usually due to the rapid pace of change taking place in our culture that kids embrace quickly and adults do not. The “generation gap” (begun sixty years ago with Baby Boomer teens) has widened. A student can be present in a room with adults yet not present at the same time if he or she has a smartphone in his or her hand. That student can live in an entirely different world on a screen even while at home with family. For millions, culture and society influence them as much as parents do. For example, when social media app innovations transform teen lifestyles and language, it’s no wonder we become frustrated at our kids. We feel they’re mastering childish habits but not adult disciplines.
The fear part usually stems from the 24/7 news cycle, broadcasting stories of terror, school shootings, drug abuse, cyber-bullying, abductions, and human trafficking. It’s not that these stories are “fake news,” but rather, we feel like they’re happening all the time and everywhere. The fear has grown amidst three-and-a-half decades of our rising awareness of the need for child safety and protection. We began to make decisions and to lead our kids out of fear. Clinical psychologist Wendy Mogel explains this challenge most effectively saying that today’s world offers us thousands of fears to worry about that we cannot control. So, many of us take all of those uncontrollable fears and reduce them to the one target we feel we can control: our children.1 In fact, it is this fear that I believe has the most destructive effect on students.

SURVEY SAYS ADULTS ARE CONCERNED

I decided I needed to see if this picture was accurate, and if so, what it was doing to today’s kids. Our organization, Growing Leaders, partnered with Harris Poll in the fall of 2018 to discover the most frequent emotions adults experience as they lead kids, including excitement, frustration, hope, apprehension, anger, concern, optimism, and others. We wondered what kind of leadership today’s young people were receiving from their parents and teachers as they grew up. The poll was nationwide with 2,016 adults of varying ages and from a variety of locations participating across the U.S.2

What we discovered did not surprise me and, in fact, confirmed my suspicions. The top emotion that comes to Americans’ minds when thinking about the future of today’s youth is concern (46 percent), with older adults more likely than their younger counterparts to cite this emotion. Pause for a moment and just consider the ramifications of this reality.

Almost half of today’s kids are being raised by adults who feel concerned and even fearful over their children’s futures. Seventy-nine percent of adults agree with the following statement, “I am fearful of the future world we are leaving for today’s youth.” Nearly all Americans (98 percent) have at least one concern regarding today’s youth, among them are the top concerns of:

- Social media or smartphone addiction (69 percent)
- Mental health issues (61 percent)
- School shootings (57 percent)
- Alcohol/drug abuse (56 percent)

Close to two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) have doubts about the abilities of today’s youth when it comes to overcoming obstacles. We are both doubtful and afraid.

Want further evidence? According to a 2018 PDK Poll, one-third of parents worry that their children aren’t even physically safe at school.3 Yes, you read that correctly. Thirty-four percent of parents are afraid for their children at school, and only about one in four are very confident that their child’s school can deter a gunman, according to that same poll.

Parents fears of school shootings, social media content (both sexting and bullying) and their child’s future all top the concerns parents have for today’s Generation Z kids. While all of these are legitimate concerns, they are also having a negative (and even damaging) effect on our children. When asked to select reasons why their children didn’t spend more time playing outdoors, 82 percent of the mothers chose “safety concerns,” including the fear of crime.4

So, what has this done to our leadership?
“Parents are going to ludicrous lengths to take the bumps out of life for their children. However, parental hyper-concern has a net effect of making kids more fragile,” says Hara Estroff Marano who’s been warning about this for fifteen years now and spoke about it brilliantly in her book *A Nation of Wimps*. “So many teens have lost the ability to tolerate distress and uncertainty, and a big reason for that is the way we parent them,” says Kevin Ashworth, Clinical Director of the Northwest Anxiety Institute in Portland, Oregon.\(^5\)

Some social scientists are calling today’s style, “Paranoid Parenting.” Lenore Skenazy began blogging about this damaging approach years ago on her site *Free Range Parenting*. When she allowed her nine-year-old son to ride a New York City subway alone, she was labeled the “World’s Worst Parent,” but it didn’t deter her pursuit of getting parents to set their kids free from parental paranoia. Skenazy has noticed that today’s Parents often use ‘negative filtering’ when thinking about the world around their kids. “Parents [say,] ‘Look at all the food, activities, words, people that can harm our kids!’ rather than ‘I’m so glad we’ve finally overcome diphtheria, polio, and famine!’” She also notes how parents use dichotomous thinking: meaning, “if something isn’t 100% safe, it’s dangerous.”\(^6\)

The impact shows up early in children. The truth is that kids are naturally anti-fragile. We adults actually make them fragile with our current leadership practices. Watch a toddler learn to walk; they fall and get up and fall and get up again. They bump their heads, their elbows, and their knees. But they just keep going. Why? Their ambition to explore uncharted territory. As they grow older, we begin to make them afraid. Watch a young child, just past the toddler age, bump his head or fall down. By this time, the child has learned to look to adults nearby to seek out their response. If adults panic and quickly rush to the child, they are conditioned to panic as well. They mirror our emotions. Kids do what kids see.

Now, consider the impact our fear and frustration have had on us.

**The Story We’re Telling Ourselves**

University of Houston Psychologist Brene Brown talks about “the story we are telling ourselves.”\(^7\) When we are in conflict, for instance, with a spouse or one of our kids, we may begin to suspect something other than the best and begin a narrative inside our minds that causes us to feel insecure, angry, distrustful, jealous—you name it. Dr. Brown suggests the best action to take in these moments is simply to acknowledge the story we are telling ourselves:

- I am failing as a wife.
- He’s a horrible person.
- I am not a good father.
- He doesn’t like me.

This story informs how we think, how we feel about a situation and even how we act. Our internal narrative significantly influences what we experience in life—positively or negatively—regardless of whether or not it is accurate. It impacts our happiness, our worry, and our level of satisfaction. The story we tell ourselves about the reality in front of us influences our life every bit as much as the reality itself.

More than 200 years ago, we learned this truth.
Elisha Perkins claimed to have discovered a treatment that cured all kinds of pains and ailments. In fact, people from all over the world were paying for his unusual cure, which amounted to him waving a thick metal rod that Perkins called a “tractor” over the place where their body felt pain—an arm, leg, lower back, etc. Perkins warned clients they’d feel a hot sensation (maybe even a burning feeling), and then the pain would begin to subside. Most people, once tortured by pain, received genuine relief.

When Dr. John Haygarth heard what was happening, he felt he had to investigate. In amazement, he observed the results of Perkins’ “tractor” with several clients. He then took a long piece of wood and wrapped it in metal, creating his own fake tractor. In January 1799, with five distinguished doctors observing, he waved it over five people with chronic pain (including rheumatism), saying it might help them. The result? He wrote afterward, “Four of the five patients believed themselves immediately, and three remarkably, relieved by the false tractors.” People were walking, stretching, and reaching items that were high above their heads without pain. Later, Haygarth requested other doctors to create their own fake tractors to see what might happen. The same results occurred. It didn't matter what the wand, stick or tractor was; people felt better.

Over the last century, this phenomenon came to be known as the placebo effect. When a sugar pill (or something else) was given to a person and they believed it would help them, in most cases, it did. Haygarth proved “the story you tell yourself is often just as important as the drug.” It actually impacts the outcomes. When anesthesiologist Henry Beecher ran out of morphine while operating on wounded soldiers during World War II, he feared performing surgery on them without any anesthetic. But, alas, he had none. So, he tried an experiment. He gave the wounded men a salt-water drip (with no pain killer) and discovered the same reality. “The patients reacted as if they had been given morphine. They didn't scream, or howl, and they didn't go into full-blown shock.”

Belief is quite a persuasive element.

What's the Point I Am Making About Kids?

I believe most adults are walking around with an over-arching narrative about today's kids. It's the story we tell ourselves—whether it’s based on fact or feeling—that informs the way we perceive, feel, and act toward them. In short, it informs how we lead them. Even if the story is based upon false assumptions, it is just as influential as reality.

My point is not that we should lie to ourselves or to our young people. Pretending something to be true is never enough. My point is to remind you of the power of your personal narrative. While we often look back at the discovery of the placebo effect with a smirk, we all know there are many occasions when what we believe about someone completely affects our reaction to him or her. Authors Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff put it this way: “We are not saying that the problems facing students, and young people more generally, are minor or ‘all in their heads.’ We are saying that what people choose to do in their heads will determine how those real problems affect them.”

Last year, a high school administrator told me the mother of one of his students asked if her daughter could change classes because her former boyfriend happened to be in her current class, and he was distracting and caused her stress. This mom’s story was: “My daughter can’t handle adversity.”

This year, a college football coach said to me, “These kids today are wimps. I have to yell at them every day to get off their phones and do their work. They got no grit. I’m quitting at the end of the season.” This coach's story is: “My student athletes can't learn life skills and don't deserve me to stick with them.”
Recently, I met with a human resources executive who informed me that six times in the last two months she had made a job offer to a young professional and heard these recent graduates reply, “Thank you—but now my parents need to interview you to make sure you’re a suitable boss for me.” These parents’ story was: “My kids are adults but still need my help to navigate decisions.”

A college instructor told me a student confronted him after he handed back some graded papers to his class. This student had received a poor grade, but challenged his teacher saying his “parents paid full tuition to the school,” so he “deserved an A in this class.” Somehow this student had embraced the narrative: “If we just pay the money, we’re entitled to the grades we want as a result.”

I spoke to a university president who frowned as he told me a parent had called his office, saying, “I just noticed on the weather channel that it’s cold up there where you are. Would you make sure my son wears his sweater today?” This person’s story was: “My adult son needs my help to make even simple decisions during the day.”

_In short, belief impacts (and even sometimes determines) the reality we experience._

So, as you begin this book, may I ask you: What is your narrative about kids today?

- Are you fearful for their future?
- Are you frustrated with them?

**When Did This Fear Paradigm Begin?**

If I’m honest, both the adults and the kids I meet these days are anxious. Students are stressed over scoring high enough on tests, getting accepted to the right college, bullying, school shootings, and getting a scholarship, among other things. Adult fears vary, but we’re most afraid of what can happen on social media, drug abuse (vaping), school shootings, cyber-bullying, terrorism, and phone addictions. If we’re honest, however, there have been sources of fear for many decades now. Since I see this everywhere, I decided to dig and discover how we became so deeply fearful.

How and when did our fear paradigm begin?

I believe several factors in the 1980s put us in our current frame of mind, including the Tylenol scare, drunk driving awareness, illegal drug awareness, etc. But I believe the modern “fear” movement has its roots at the beginning of that decade.

In 1981, John Walsh lost his six-year-old son (Adam) to a kidnapper and murderer. Adam was at a shopping mall with his mother when he left a video game kiosk and was abducted. This sent John on a mission to save other children from such a fate. It was understandable. Child abductions are horrifying. They are every parents’ worst nightmare. What evolved, however, was a perfect storm for all of us in America. John created the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center, which advocated for legislative reform and eventually persuaded the government to launch a _Center for Missing and Exploited Children_. John helped create a television movie called _Adam_, which told his son’s story and was watched by thirty-eight million viewers.
Walsh then launched a television show, *America’s Most Wanted* (which most of us have heard of), and finally, Walsh was instrumental in getting pictures of missing children on milk cartons and other posters around the country. Throughout the 1980s, parents had begun to become fearful, even paranoid, about their children’s safety.

If we are being honest, we must acknowledge that our fears are understandable but often exaggerated. And they have harmed our kids.

Centuries ago, Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote, “What really frightens and dismays us is not external events themselves, but the way in which we think about them. It is not things that disturb us, but our interpretations of their significance.”

Even though John Walsh was working to make our world safer, the unintended consequence of his work was that it made us all feel the world was becoming more dangerous.

Follow My Sequence of Thought…

1. **American adults’ top emotion regarding kids today is concern.**
   I mentioned earlier our 2018 Growing Leaders and Harris Poll survey of U.S. adults to discover what our most common “narrative” is regarding kids. What is the story we hold in our heads about Gen Z? Our discoveries confirmed my suspicions. Two of the top three words adults use to describe their attitudes regarding kids today are **concern** and **fear**. Our fear tends to govern our words and actions toward them. Because our kids are our “trophies” and are reflections of how well we teach and raise them, we (parents, teachers, coaches, and leaders) became focused on this fear they won’t be safe, won’t be happy, and won’t reach their potential.

2. **When adults are fearful, we tend to try to seize control of our kids’ lives.**
   Phase two in this sequence is our fears make us more prescriptive and more controlling with our young. Parents, coaches, and teachers all prescribe the steps students must take to succeed, and more importantly, to avoid failure. We have a ridiculous dread of failure. The greater our fear, the more we tend to seize control and ensure everything gets done to get the grade, to get the acceptance letter, the scholarship, the position, you name it. We feel the best way to make sure it all happens is to monitor it ourselves. Kids experience more supervised time under adults now than at any point in modern history.

3. **When we become controlling, kids feel out of control of their futures.**
   The natural third phase in this sequence is that when we take over their lives and control their inputs and outcomes, they like it at first, feeling a safety net underneath them. I believe most middle-class kids assume that if they fall or fail, some adult will swoop in and save them. It feels nice. Unfortunately, it also leads to a very negative feeling of being out of control. Kids hear mom nag them about the application, the quiz on Friday, their gym shorts, the permission slip that’s due, grandmas’ birthday, and more. They begin to both need mom’s help and resent it. It’s a love/hate relationship. There is a gnawing feeling that they are not even in control of their own lives.

4. **When they feel this way, they assume an external locus of control.**
   The natural mental tendency at this point is to slip into an “external locus of control.” Dr. Julian Rotter introduced this term to us over 60 years ago. We either tend to believe our success is up to us (internal locus) or it is up to someone or something else (external locus). When a kid constantly has adults control his life, he naturally spirals into an assumption that fate or external forces govern his outcomes. He can begin to blame others when things go wrong and feel entitled to benefits from others because he’s come to expect them. Someone must do the work for him. He stops “owning” his life. (We’ll examine this phenomenon more deeply in later chapters.)
5. When they experience an external locus of control, anxiety goes up.

Studies show that when a person assumes an external locus of control, he becomes more stressed, more anxious, even depressed. Anytime someone else is in charge of our welfare—even if they’re a good person—we can get anxious, especially when we are capable of caring for ourselves. Reflect for a moment: when you feel your fate is up to another person, doesn’t that make you feel just a bit unsettled? It is out of your hands; you are not managing your day. While I don’t believe our kids’ anxiety issues are solely due to our leadership, I do believe we adults have added to the problem, unwittingly.

It is time to equip and release students to take responsibility for their own lives. In doing this, we express the belief that they are capable of leading themselves.

This is a huge step, however, for today’s adults.

The Biggest Changes Generation Z Brings to the Adult World

Susan Sawyer, M.D. of the Murdoch Children’s Institute confirmed something I have been saying for years now: being an adolescent today is very different than it was even 20 years ago. Certainly, different than when I was a teen.

The adolescent phase of human development now lasts much longer than it once did. In fact, adolescence, as a stage of life, is expanding on both sides. Kids are entering adolescence in elementary school, being exposed to information on teen websites and social media, getting something tattooed or pierced, and entering puberty earlier. At the same time, young people are staying in adolescence well into their twenties. They are not working jobs or leaving mom and dad until much later in life.

According to MedPage Today’s writer Kristina Fiore, adolescence begins at age ten today (the onset of puberty) and extends until twenty-four years old. Some educators would argue it continues to the ages of twenty-six to twenty-eight due to the delay of emotional maturation. What was once a doorway from childhood to adulthood has now become an elongated portion of life in today’s young people. It’s a fifteen-year window of time.

How Is This Affecting Generation Z?

So, how is this reality impacting students today? The nationwide data may surprise you. They’re avoiding certain adult temptations but also some adult responsibilities that once were “rites of passage” for young adults. It’s both good news and bad news. Take a look.

Avoiding Adult Temptations

Typically, teenage students begin to experiment with adult behaviors such as consuming alcohol, engaging in sex, and smoking. For example, according to a study among teens between 2010 and 2016, just 29 percent of eighth graders drank alcohol, down from 56 percent in the 1990s. And 67 percent of twelfth graders drank, down from 93 percent forty years ago. Engaging in sex dropped slightly from 68 percent in the 90s to 62 percent now. Smoking has seen a significant drop among high school students too. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, just 8 percent of high schoolers smoked cigarettes last year. This number is a record low. The changes are seen in all economic groups and from all parts of the country.
This is all good news.

Avoiding Adult Responsibilities

While the above numbers are encouraging, young adults today are also avoiding many of the responsibilities that accompany adulthood. For instance, the age teens begin driving, the age they begin working a job, and the age they begin living on their own are all rising. Thirty-two percent of eighth graders have worked for pay, down from 63 percent twenty-five years ago. About half of twelfth graders have worked for pay, down from 76 percent. When I was a teen, I remember a driver’s licenses being a rite of passage for sixteen-year-olds. Today, not so much. Just 73 percent of twelfth graders even have their licenses today. Kids are fine with mom driving them around. In short, these teens are less likely to drive, work for pay, or live on their own until later in life.

Even dating without their parents has gone down. When I was a teen in 1976, 88 percent of twelfth-grade high school students dated. It was another rite of passage. Today, it’s dropped to 63 percent. Instead, teens will actually go out on a date with their parents. There’s obviously nothing wrong with this; I relish strong parent/teen relationships. The downside may just be, however, that these same young adults are not even able to live independently, moving out of the house much later than they did twenty-five years ago. Author Dr. Jean Twenge said, “The whole developmental pathway has slowed way down. Today’s 18-year old is acting more like a 15-year old and today’s young adult in their 20s acting more like a teen.”

This is not such good news.

Changing Adult Norms

- Their community is online, not in person. While their grandparents likely belonged to a civic club and spent time with neighbors, Generation Z prefers connecting virtually on a screen.
- Their beliefs are individual, not corporate. Many still claim to be spiritual, but they are less likely to participate in organized religious meetings.
- Their identification as a male or female is shifting. Gender is more fluid, and options for Generation Z are expanding beyond the binary ones of the past.

This is scary for some adults because the world feels so different.

As I’ve mentioned, when adults spot these shifts, we become fearful or frustrated. Teachers find that the pedagogies they learned in college may not work as well as they did a decade ago. Parents often find they can’t raise their children the way they were raised as kids and see the same results. The athletic coaching climate today has been revolutionized by the expectations placed on them to win and to play every kid on the team. And employers tell me they’re frequently baffled at how to onboard a young professional onto the work team—because they don’t think like anyone else. Our leadership, however, is paramount to their success.

A Relevant Experiment: Our Expectations Matter

If you’re still unconvinced regarding how much your approach influences the young people around you, allow me to share with you some experiments that made me think twice about how I lead them.
Over fifty years ago, Robert Rosenthal and Kermit Fode began to experiment with rats in a maze. The goal for each rat was to reach the “gray end” of a T-shaped maze for an edible reward. The students who were assigned to work with them gave the rats ten chances to reach their goal: to reward them if they did and to record the results. In the end, it was the students, not the rats, who were the “study” in this experiment.

The students were told that through careful breeding, specialists had created a strain of genius rats and a strain of dummy rats. Half the students were told they had the smart ones, while the other half were told they had the remedial rats. In reality, no such selective breeding had happened. They were all average. The point of the experiment was to test the results of these interchangeable rats based on their handlers to see if the student’s expectations biased the results. You can probably guess what happened.

Rosenthal and Fode discovered that the rats the students believed to be brilliant performed measurably better than the rats believed to be dumb. The researchers then asked the students about their behavior toward the rats and found a difference in the manner in which the two student groups related to their rodents. Those who believed they had genius rats, for instance, handled them more gently and spoke to them more kindly and with belief. In the end, their beliefs affected the rats’ behavior.

Having published these results, another set of researchers repeated the experiment, this time admonishing the students to treat each rat identically, regardless of their perceived potential. But, although the students attempted to act impartially, alas they could not. They unconsciously delivered non-verbal cues based on their expectations, and the rats responded accordingly.

Rosenthal later decided to see if these experiments could be translated to humans.

He asked two sets of students to show a group of people photographs of human faces, asking them to guess what they were feeling. Although the faces depicted neutral emotions, the job of the student experimenter was to read a script and record the responses of their subjects. As with the rats, one cluster of students was told they were interacting with people who were failures in their careers and the other cluster with people who'd been wildly successful. To ensure their words could not impact the results, the students were told to follow the script and read it in a monotone fashion. Was there a difference? To make a long story short, every single student who had been led to expect high ratings from their “successful subjects” obtained higher ratings from their group than did any of those expecting low ratings.

The leadership and expectations of the experimenters impacted the results.

Dr. Rosenthal went on to focus his study on this issue: What do expectations mean for our children? His research later demonstrated that teacher expectations genuinely impact the academic performance of students. The faculty who were told they had gifted students ended up with significantly higher scores from their classrooms than those who were told they taught average-performing students. In fact, all the students in the study were average performers up until that point.

Of those who'd been identified as brilliant, 80 percent had an increase of at least ten IQ points. What's more, about 2 percent of the gifted group gained thirty or more IQ points. It was at this point that adults began to realize how labeling children as high performing proved to be a powerful self-fulfilling prophecy.

Our expectations and belief are two of the most significant factors in determining the success of the Generation Z students we lead. I wonder, are you fearful or hopeful for Generation Z? Whatever your posture, you can bet they already know how you feel about them.
End Notes


9. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

If you liked this eBook and found this information to be helpful, then please share this with your family and friends and continue reading the full book by going to GENERATIONZUNFILTERD.com.
If you read just one book on leading today’s youngest generation, make it this one. You’ll be equipped to lead kids with hope and belief instead of fear and frustration.

John C. Maxwell
Bestselling Author, Founder of the John Maxwell Company

GENERATION Z UNFILTERED
Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population

Dr. Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak’s new book—Generation Z Unfiltered—identifies nine challenges that today’s teens and young adults are dealing with and how to help them address those realities. It was written to be your practical handbook for understanding Generation Z.

Dr. Tim Elmore is a best-selling author and international speaker who equips adult leaders of the emerging generation to better connect with and lead today’s students. He has trained thousands of leaders in partnership with nationally renowned churches and organizations like the Nebraska Department of Education, National FFA Organization, University of Alabama Athletic Department, The Ohio State University and Chick-fil-A.

This Resource Helps Leaders...

Understand
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